

MARCH 1997

ELLERY QUEEN

THE WORLD'S LEADING
MYSTERY MAGAZINE

Hot on the Trail
of a Good
Mystery?

DIAL US

Lawrence Sanders
Nancy Pickard
Jeffery Deaver

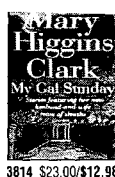
\$2.95 U.S. / \$3.75 CAN.



03

0 38716 36006 4

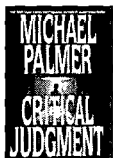
LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



Red any good Herrings lately?

Best-selling mysteries. Murderously low prices.

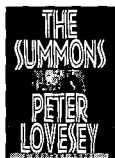
You're on the right scent.



6 books for 99¢



with membership in **Mystery Guild®**



SIX REASONS TO JOIN NOW...

1. JOINING IS EASY. Just choose 6 books for 99¢. Your bill (including shipping and handling) will come when membership is confirmed. We'll also send you the FREE *Mystery Guild Tote*. **2. YOUR SATISFACTION IS GUARANTEED.** If you are not happy with your books, return them within 10 days at our expense. Your membership will be canceled; you'll owe nothing. The FREE Tote is yours to keep as our "thank you" for trying us. **3. SAVE UP TO 60% off publishers' hardcover edition prices.** Just pick at least 4 more books at our regular low prices during your membership. Take up to 2 years! Then you may resign membership any time. **4. EXTRA BONUS!** Take a 7th book now for \$3.99, plus shipping and handling, and reduce your membership agreement to only 3 books. Every book we offer is a full-text hardcover edition, sometimes altered in size to fit special presses. **5. A FREE Club Magazine** comes to you up to 17 times a year. Each issue reviews the Featured Book Selections plus dozens of alternate books—some are special Club editions you won't find anywhere else. Look for up to 2 special issues a year with super selections and more discounts. **6. ORDERING IS SIMPLE.** Featured Selections are sent to you automatically. To cancel—or to order other books—mail in your Member Reply Form by the marked date. Shipping and handling (plus sales tax, where applicable) will be added to each order. You'll always have 10 days to decide. If your Member Reply Form is late and unwanted books arrive, please return them at our expense.

*Explicit scenes and/or language Prices in fine print are for publishers' editions. Prices in bold print are for Club hardcover editions.



FREE GIFT
with membership



2501* \$24.95/\$12.98



0489* \$23.95/\$11.98



0802* \$25.95/\$10.98

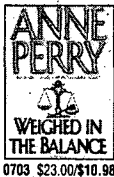


1644 \$26.95/\$14.98

Members save up to
60% off
Publishers' Hardcover
Edition Prices!



1347 \$24.00/\$11.98



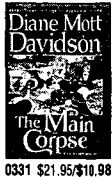
0703 \$23.00/\$10.98



1396 \$24.95/\$11.98



1065 \$23.00/\$11.98



0331 \$21.95/\$10.98



1123 \$20.00/\$9.98



0562 \$23.50/\$11.98



1776 \$23.00/\$11.98



2568 \$21.95/\$9.98



1339 \$21.95/\$10.98



3897 \$23.00/\$11.98



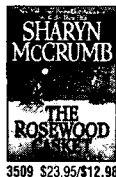
3508* \$23.95/\$10.98



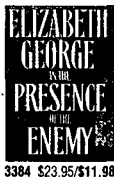
3012 \$21.95/\$10.98



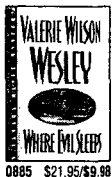
0844 \$22.95/\$11.98



3509 \$23.95/\$12.98



3384 \$23.95/\$11.98



0885 \$21.95/\$9.98



3426 \$24.00/\$12.98

MYSTERY

MAIL TO: Mystery Guild
6550 East 30th Street
P.O. Box 6362
Indianapolis, IN 46206-6362

Please write book numbers here:

33

YES! Please enroll me in *Mystery Guild* according to the risk-free membership plan described in this ad. Send me the 6 BOOKS I've indicated. Bill me just 99¢, plus shipping and handling. Also, send my FREE CLUB TOTE.

SAVE EVEN MORE! Send me this book now and reduce my commitment to 3 books. Bill me an added \$3.99, plus shipping and handling.

(write book number)

78506			32

Mr./Mrs.

Miss/Ms. _____

(please print)

Address _____

Apt. _____

City _____

State _____

ZIP _____

Members accepted in U.S.A. and Canada only. Canadian members serviced from Canada, where offer is slightly different. Sales tax added where applicable. We reserve the right to reject any application.

EQM 3/97

CONTENTS

FICTION



Deadly attraction
Page 38



Cape Town confession
Page 62

Cover Illustration by
Richard Parisi

Dell Magazines
1270 Avenue of
the Americas
New York, NY 10020

Note: indicia on
page 158

The Ehrengraf Affirmation BY LAWRENCE BLOCK	4
No Parking BY JEFFRY SCOTT	18
The Kneeling Soldier BY JEFFERY DEEVER	38
A Tough Case to Figure BY DICK LOCHTE	56
Ach, Die Seemann Ist Perdu BY FRANCES JOYCE	62
Like Father, Like Son BY RICHARD T. CHIZMAR	78
The Town Where No One Stayed Over BY EDWARD D. HOCH	84
Reasonable Doubts BY STEPHEN F. WILCOX	101
Good Time Had by All BY ROBERT BARNARD	112
The Habit of Neglect BY SCOTT MACKAY	124
Arthur's Story BY STEPHANIE K. BENDEL	133
Speak No Evil BY NANCY PICKARD	142

REVIEWS

The Jury Box BY JON L. BREEN	75
---	----

POETRY

Crash Diet BY DEBORAH LEE	37
--	----

NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC VIDEO Presents:

The Amazing World Of **Cats**

**Discover the secrets of
their intriguing behavior on this
fascinating, beautifully filmed video!**

- The body posture that reveals when a cat is about to "spring"
- Your cat's secret alertness during a "cat nap"
- The jungle predator exposed in your cat's play and games
- The keen hunter's sense that enables cats to stalk in the dark
- The elusive function of cats' whiskers
- The astonishing attributes that give cats "nine lives" and more!



For thousands of years, cats have charmed us, delighted us...and perplexed us. Have you ever wondered why cats always land on all four feet? Or what makes them purr? Or why they launch into a flurry of activity in the evening? Now, a fascinating video from National Geographic answers the questions asked most—what makes cats behave the way they do?

THRILL TO DRAMATIC FILM SEQUENCES

Join wildlife experts from around the world as they unravel riddles that have mystified cat lovers throughout the ages. Find out what few cat owners realize—within even the sweetest pussycat lurks the primal instincts of a lion, tiger, cougar or lynx. Thrill to dramatic film sequences that show how the behavior of your cat is never far removed from that of its cousins in the wild, even when at play.

FIND OUT WHY CATS ACT THE WAY THEY DO

Explore the intriguing relationship that has grown between cats and people. Adored and revered in ancient Egypt, feared and even persecuted in medieval times, inspiration to poets and painters, cats have never been more popular than today. Hear how the comforting companionship of a cat may even benefit our health, well-being and longevity. Sensational, one-of-a-kind video from National Geographic makes a delightful gift for any cat lover. VHS. 63 minutes.

Abigail's Treasures, Dept. DNGC-3, PO Box 66, Avon-by-the-Sea, NJ 07717

FASTER SERVICE CALL (908) 280-9300

Please send me my National Geographic's "Cat" Video(s) (Item #W742) on 30-day money back guarantee. VHS only.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____

Zip _____

☐ One Video for \$19.95 plus \$3.95 postage and handling. Total \$23.90.

☐ Two Videos for only \$38.00 plus \$4.95 postage and handling. Total \$42.95.

Enclosed is \$ _____ (NJ residents please add sales tax) Make check or money order payable to Abigail's Treasures. • Charge to my: ☐ MasterCard ☐ Visa ☐ American Express

Account # _____

Exp. Date _____

To help process order, you may wish to include your daytime phone number

() _____

Please allow up to 4-6
weeks for delivery.
©1995

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED



THE EHRENGRAF AFFIRMATION

by Lawrence Block

"I

've been giving this a lot of thought," Dale McCandless said. "Actually, there's not much you can do around here but think."

Ehrengraf glanced around the cell, wondering to what extent it was conducive to thought. There were, it seemed to him, no end of other activities to which the little room would lend itself. There was a bed on which you could sleep, a chair in which you could read, a desk at which you might write the Great American Jail-house Novel. There was enough floor space to permit push-ups or sit-ups or running in place, and, high overhead, there was the pipe that supported the light fixture, and that would as easily support you, should you contrive to braid strips of bedsheet

into a rope and hang yourself.

Ehrengraf rather hoped the young man wouldn't attempt the last-named pursuit. He was, after all, innocent of the crimes of which he stood accused. All you had to do was look at him to know as much, and the little lawyer had not even needed to do that. He'd been convinced of his client's innocence the instant the young man had become a client. No client of Martin H. Ehrengraf could ever be other than innocent. This was more than a presumption for Ehrengraf. It was an article of faith.

"What I think would work for me," young McCandless continued, "is the good old Abuse Excuse."

"The Abuse Excuse?"

"Like those rich kids in California," McCandless said. "My father was all the time beating up on me and making me do stuff, and I was in fear for my life, blah blah blah, so what else could I do?"

"Your only recourse was to whip out a semiautomatic assault rifle," Ehrengraf said, "and empty a clip into the man."

"Those clips empty out in no time at all. You touch the trigger and the next thing you know the gun's empty and there's fifteen bullets in the target."

"Fortunately, however, you had another clip."

"For Mom," McCandless agreed. "Hey, she was as abusive as he was."

"And you were afraid of her."

"Sure."

"Your mother was in a wheelchair," Ehrengraf said gently. "She

In the February 1978 *EQMM*, Lawrence Block introduced a series character who bears many resemblances to Melville Davisson Post's Randolph Mason, the unscrupulous attorney-hero of stories Post wrote at the turn of the century. Mr. Block's Ehrengraf operates on the principle that his clients are necessarily innocent, despite all evidence to the contrary, creating the impression that he too may be willing to transgress moral lines. We are delighted to have Ehrengraf return to our pages after an absence of nearly a dozen years, for there is no one like him in modern crime fiction. †

suffered from multiple sclerosis. Your father walked with a cane as the result of a series of small strokes. You're a big, strapping lad. Hulking, one might even say. It might be difficult to convince a jury that you were in fear for your life."

"That's a point."

"If you'd been living with your parents," Ehrengraf added, "people might wonder why you didn't just move out. But you had in fact moved out some time ago, hadn't you? You have your own home on the other side of town."

Dale McCandless nodded thoughtfully. "I guess the only thing to do," he said, "is play the Race Card."

"The Race Card?"

"Racist cops framed me," he said. "They planted the evidence."

"The evidence?"

"The assault rifle with my prints on it. The blood spatters on my clothes. The gloves."

"The gloves?"

"They found a pair of gloves on the scene," McCandless said. "But I'll tell you something nobody else knows. If I were to try on those gloves, you'd see that they're actually a size too small for me. I couldn't get my hands into them."

"And racist cops planted them."

"You bet."

Ehrengraf put the tips of his fingers together. "It's a little difficult for me to see the racial angle here," he said gently. "You're white, Mr. McCandless."

"Yeah, right."

"And both your parents were white. And all of the police officers involved in the investigation are white. All of your parents' known associates are white, and everyone living in that neighborhood is white. If there were a woodpile at the scene, I've no doubt we'd find a Caucasian in it. This is an all-white case, Mr. McCandless, and I just don't see a race card for us to play."

"Rats," Dale McCandless said. "If the Abuse Excuse is out and there's no way to play the Race Card, I don't know how I'm going to get out of this. The only thing left is the Rough Sex defense, and I suppose you've got some objection to that, too."

"I think it would be a hard sell," Ehrengraf said.

"I was afraid you'd say that."

"It seems to me you're trying to draw inspiration from some

high-profile cases that don't fit the present circumstances. But there is one case that does."

"What's that?"

"Miss Elizabeth Borden," Ehrengraf said.

McCandless frowned in thought. "Elizabeth Borden," he said. "I know Elsie Borden, she's married to Elmer and she gives condensed milk. Even if Elsie's short for Elizabeth, I don't see how—"

"Lizzie," Ehrengraf pointed out, "is also short for Elizabeth."

"Lizzie Borden," McCandless said, and his eyes lit up. "Oh yeah. A long time ago, right? Took an axe and gave her mother forty whacks?"

"So they say."

"And when she saw what she had done, she gave her father forty-one. I remember the poem."

"Everybody remembers the poem," Ehrengraf said. "What everyone forgets is that Miss Borden was innocent."

"You're kidding. She got off?"

"Of course she did," Ehrengraf said. "The jury returned a verdict of Not Guilty. And how could they do otherwise, Mr. McCandless? The woman was innocent." He allowed himself a small smile. "Even as you and I," he said.

"Innocent," Dale McCandless said. "What a concept."

"All my clients are innocent," Ehrengraf told him. "That's what makes my work so gratifying. That and the fees, of course."

"Speaking of which," McCandless said, "you can set your mind to rest on that score. Even if they wind up finding me guilty and that keeps me from inheriting from my parents, I've still got more than enough to cover whatever you charge me. See, I came into a nice piece of change when my grandmother passed away."

"Is that what enabled you to buy a house of your own?"

"It set me up pretty good. I've got the house and I've got money in the bank. See, I was her sole heir, so when she took a tumble on the back staircase, everything she had came to me."

"She fell down the stairs?"

McCandless nodded. "They ought to do something about that staircase," he said. "Three months earlier, my grandfather fell down those same stairs and broke his neck."

"And left all his money to your grandmother," Ehrengraf said.

"Right."

"Who in turn left it to you."

"Yeah. Handy, huh?"

"Indeed," said Ehrengraf. "It must have been a frightening thing for an old woman, tumbling down a flight of stairs."

"Maybe not," McCandless said. "According to the autopsy, she was already dead when she fell. So what probably happened is, she had a heart attack while she was standing at the top of the stairs and never felt a thing."

"A heart attack."

"Or a stroke or something," McCandless said carefully. "Or maybe she was sleeping and a pillow got stuck over her face and suffocated her."

"The pillow just got stuck on top of her face?"

"Well, she was old," McCandless said. "Who knows what could happen?"

"And then, after the pillow smothered her, how do you suppose she got from her bed to the staircase?"

"Sleepwalking," McCandless said.

"Of course," said Ehrengraf. "I should have thought of that."

"My parents lived in this ranch house," McCandless said. "Big sprawling thing, lots of square footage but all of it on one level. No basement and no attic." He sighed. "In other words, no stairs." He shook his head ruefully. "Point is, there was never any problem about my grandparents' death, so I've got some money of my own. So you don't have to worry about your fee."

Ehrengraf drew himself up straight. He was a small man, but his perfect posture and impeccably tailored raw silk suit lent him stature beyond his height. "There will be no fee," he said, "unless you are found innocent."

"Huh?"

"My longstanding policy, Mr. McCandless. My fees are quite considerable, but they are payable only in the event that my client is exonerated. As it happens, I rarely see the inside of a courtroom. My clients are innocent, and their innocence always wins out in the long run. I do what I can toward that end, often working behind the scenes. And, when charges are dropped, when the real killer confesses, when my client's innocence has been demonstrated to the satisfaction of the legal system, then and only then do I profit from my efforts on his behalf."

McCandless was silent for a long moment. At length he fixed his eyes on the little lawyer. "We got ourselves a problem," he said. "See, just between you and me, I did it."



"With stairs," young McCandless was saying, "it might have been entirely different. Especially with Mom in the wheelchair. Good steep flight of stairs and it's a piece of cake. Instead I went out and got the gun, and then I bought the gloves."

"Gloves?"

"A size too small," McCandless said. "To leave at the crime scene. I thought—well, never mind what I thought. I guess I wasn't thinking too clearly. Hey, that reminds me. You think maybe a Dim Cap defense would turn the trick?"

"Innocent by reason of diminished capacity?"

"Yeah. See, I did a couple of lines of DTT before I went out and bought the gloves."

"Do you mean DDT? The insecticide?"

"Naw, DTT. It's short for di-tetra thiazole, it's a tranquilizer for circus animals, but if you snort it, it sort of mellows you out. What I could do, though, is I could forget about the DTT and tell people I ate a Twinkie."

Court TV, Ehrengraf thought, had a lot to answer for. "You got the gun," he prompted his client, "and you bought the gloves . . ."

"And I went over there and did what I had to do. But of course I don't remember that part."

"You don't?"

McCandless shook his head. "Not a thing, from the time I parked the car in their driveway until I woke up hours later in my own bed. See, I never remember. I don't remember doing my grandparents, either. It's all because of the EKG."

"I'm not sure I follow you," said Ehrengraf, rather understating the matter. "You had an electrocardiogram?"

"That's for your heart, isn't it? My heart's fine. No, EKG's this powder, you roll it up and smoke it. I couldn't tell you what the initials stand for, but it was originally developed as a fertilizer for African violets. They had to take it off the market when they found out what it did to people."

"What does it do?"

"I guess it gets you high," McCandless said, "but I don't know for sure. See, what happens is you take it and you black out. It's the same story every time I smoke it. I light up, I take the first puff, and the next thing I remember I'm waking up in my own bed hours later. So I couldn't tell you what it feels like. All I know is

what it lets me do while I'm operating behind it. And so far it's let me do my grandparents and my mother and father."

"I knew it," Ehrengraf said.

"How's that?"

"I knew you were innocent," he said. "I knew it. Mr. McCandless, you have no memory whatsoever of any of those killings, is that what you're telling me?"

"Yeah, but—"

"You may have intended to do those persons harm. But it was so much against your nature that you had to ingest a dangerous controlled substance in order to gird yourself for the task. Is that correct?"

"Well, more or less, but—"

"And you have no recollection of committing any crimes whatsoever. You believe yourself to be guilty, and as a result you are in a jail cell charged with a hideous crime. Do you see the problem, sir? The problem is not what you have done, because in fact you have done nothing. The problem is what you believe."

McCandless looked at him.

"If you don't believe in your own innocence," Ehrengraf demanded, "how can the rest of the world believe in it? Your thoughts are powerful, Mr. McCandless. And right now your own negative thoughts are damning you as a murderer."

"But—"

"You must affirm your innocence, sir."

"Okay," McCandless agreed. "I'm innocent.' How's that?"

"It's a start," Ehrengraf said. He opened his briefcase, drew out a yellow legal pad, produced a pen. "But it takes more than a simple declaration to change your own thoughts on the matter. What I want you to do is affirm your innocence in writing."

"Just write 'I'm innocent' over and over?"

"It's a little more complicated than that." Ehrengraf uncapped the pen and drew a vertical line down the center of the page. "Here's what you do," he said. "Over here on the left you write 'I am completely innocent.' Then on the right you immediately write down the first negative response to that sentence that pops into your mind."

"Fair enough." McCandless took the pad and pen. *I am completely innocent*, he wrote in the left-hand column. *What a load of crap*, he wrote at once on the right.

"Excellent," Ehrengraf assured him. "Now keep going, but with a different response each time."

"Just keep going?"

"Until you get to the bottom of the page," Ehrengraf said.

The pen raced over the paper as McCandless no sooner proclaimed his complete innocence than he dashed off a repudiation of it. When he'd reached the bottom of the page, Ehrengraf took the pad from him. *I am completely innocent. / I murdered both my parents. . . . I am completely innocent. / I killed Grandma and Grampa. . . . I am completely innocent. / I deserve the gas chamber. . . . I am completely innocent. / I'm guilty as sin. . . . I am completely innocent. / They ought to hang me. . . . I am completely innocent. / I'm a murderer. . . . I am completely innocent. / I killed a girl last year and there wasn't even any money in it for me. . . . I am completely innocent. / I'm a born killer. . . . I am completely innocent. / I am bad, bad, bad!*

"Excellent," Ehrengraf said.

"You think so? If the district attorney got a hold of that . . ."

"Ah, but he won't, will he?" Ehrengraf crumpled the paper, stuffed it into a pocket, handed the legal pad back to his client. "All of those negative thoughts," he explained, "have been festering in your mind and soul, preventing you from believing in your own untarnished innocence. By letting them surface this way, we can stamp them out and affirm your own true nature."

"My own true nature's nothing to brag about," McCandless said.

"That's your negativity talking," Ehrengraf told him. "At heart you're an innocent child of God." He pointed to the legal pad, made scribbling motions in the air. "You've got work to do," he said.

"I hope you got another of those yellow pads there," Dale McCandless said. "It's a funny thing. I was never much of a writer, and in school it was torture for me to write a two-page composition for English class. You know, 'How I Spent My Summer Vacation'?"

Ehrengraf, who could well imagine how a young McCandless might have spent his summer vacation, was diplomatically silent.

"But this time around," McCandless said, "I've been writing up a storm. What's it been, five days since you got me started? Well, I ran through that pad you gave me, and I got one of the guards to bring me this little notebook, but I like the pads better. Here, look at what I wrote this morning."

Ehrengraf unfolded a sheet of unlined white paper. McCandless had drawn a line down its center, writing his affirmation over and over again in the left-hand column, jotting down his responses to the right. *I am completely innocent. / I've been in trouble all my life. . . . I am completely innocent. / Maybe it wasn't always my fault. . . . I am completely innocent. / I don't remember doing anything bad. . . . I am completely innocent. / In my heart I am. . . . I am completely innocent. / How great it would be if it was true!*

"You've come a long way," Ehrengraf told his client. "You see how the nature of your responses is changing."

"It seems like magic," McCandless said.

"The magic of affirmation."

"All along, I would just write down the first thing that popped into my head. But the old bad stuff just stopped popping in."

"You cleared it away."

"I don't know what I did," McCandless said. "Maybe I just wore it out. But it got to the point where it didn't seem natural to write that I was a born killer."

"Because you're not."

"I guess."

"And how do you feel now, Mr. McCandless? Without a pen in your hand, just talking face to face? Are you innocent of the crimes of which you stand accused?"

"Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"It's almost too much to hope for," the young man said, "but maybe I am. I could be, couldn't I? I really could be."

Ehrengraf beamed. "Indeed you are," he said, "and it's my job to prove it. And yours—" he opened his briefcase, provided his client with a fresh legal pad "—yours to further affirm that innocence until there is no room in your consciousness for doubt and negativity. You've got work to do, Mr. McCandless. Are you up for it?"

Eagerly, McCandless reached for the pad.

"Little Bobby Bickerstaff," McCandless said, shaking his head in wonder.

Ehrengraf's hand went to the knot of his necktie, adjusting it imperceptibly. The tie was that of the 1 Society, and Ehrengraf was not entitled to wear it, never having been a member of that organization. It was, however, his invariable choice for occasions of triumph, and this was just such an occasion.

"I never would have dreamed it," McCandless said. "Not in a million years."

"You knew him, then?"

"We went to grade school together. In fact, we were in the same class until I got held back. You know something? *That's* hard to believe, too."

"That you'd be held back? I must say I find it hard to believe myself. You're an intelligent young man."

"Oh, it wasn't for that. It was for deportment. You know, talking in class, throwing chalk."

"High spirits," Ehrengraf said.

"Setting fires," McCandless went on. "Breaking windows. Doing cars."

"Doing cars?"

"Teachers' cars," the young man explained. "Ice-picking the tires, or sugaring the gas tank, or keying the paint job. Or doing the windows."

"Bricking them," Ehrengraf suggested.

"I suppose you could call it that. That's what's hard to believe, Mr. Ehrengraf. That I did those things."

"I see."

"I used to be like that," he said, and frowned in thought. "Or maybe I just used to *think* I was that way, and that's why I did bad things."

"Ah," Ehrengraf said.

"All along I was innocent," McCandless said, groping for the truth. "But I didn't know it, I had this belief I was bad, and when I was a little kid it made me do bad things."

"Precisely."

"And I got in trouble, and they blamed me even when I didn't do anything bad, and that convinced me I was really bad, bad clear to the bone. And . . . and . . ."

The youth put his head in his hands and sobbed. "There, there," Ehrengraf said softly, and clapped him on the shoulder. After a moment McCandless got hold of himself and said, "But little Bobby Bickerstaff. I can't get over it."

"He killed your parents," Ehrengraf said.

"It's so hard to believe. I always thought of him as a little goody-goody."

"A nice quiet boy," Ehrengraf said.

"Yeah, well, those are the ones who lose it, aren't they? They

pop off one day and the neighbors can't believe it, same as I can't believe it myself about Bobby. What was the name of the couple he killed?"

"Roger and Sheila Capstone."

"I didn't know them," McCandless said, "but they lived in the same neighborhood as my folks, in the same kind of house. And was she in a wheelchair the same as my mom?"

"It was Mr. Capstone who was wheelchair-bound," Ehrengraf said. "He'd been crippled in an automobile accident."

"Poor guy. And little Bobby Bickerstaff emptied a clip into him, and another into his wife."

"So it seems."

"Meek little Bobby. Whacked them both, then went into the bathroom and wrote something on the mirror."

"It was Mrs. Capstone's dressing-table mirror," Ehrengraf said. "And he used her lipstick to write his last message."

"This is the last time. God forgive me."

"His very words."

"And then he put on the woman's underwear," McCandless said, "or maybe he put it on before, who knows, and then he popped a fresh clip in his gun and stuck the business end in his mouth and got off a burst. Must have made some mess."

"I imagine it did."

McCandless shook his head in amazement. "Little Bobby," he said. "Mr. Straight Arrow. Cops searched his place afterward, house he grew up in, what did they find? All these guns and knives and dirty magazines and stuff."

"It happens all the time," Ehrengraf said.

"Other stuff, too. Some things that must have been stolen from my parents' house, not that anybody had even noticed they were missing. Some jewelry of my mom's and a sterling silver flask with my dad's initials engraved on it. I don't think I ever even knew he had a flask, but how many are you going to find engraved W. R. McC.?"

"It must have been his."

"Well, sure. But what really wrapped it up was the diary. From what I heard, most of it was sketchy, just weird stuff that was going through his mind. But the entry the day after my parents died, that was something else."

"It was a little vague as well," Ehrengraf said, "but quite conclu-

sive all the same. He told how he'd gone to your parents' home and found you passed out in a chair."

"From the EKG, it must have been."

"He thought about killing all three of you. Instead, he gunned down both your parents, making sure that you and your clothes were spattered with their blood, then wiped his prints off the empty gun and pressed it into your hands."

"Bobby's mom was crippled," McCandless remembered. "I remember kids used to say we ought to be friends because of it. Like him and me were in the same boat."

"But you weren't friends."

"Are you kidding? A hood like me team up with a goody-goody like Bobby Bickerstaff?" His expression turned thoughtful. "Except it turns out I was innocent all along, so I wasn't such a hood after all. And Bobby wasn't such a goody-goody."

"No."

"In fact," McCandless said, "he might have had something to do with his own parents' death. Bobby was still a kid at the time. They weren't too clear on what happened, whether it was a suicide pact or the old man committed a mercy killing and then killed himself afterward. I guess everybody figured it amounted to the same thing. But now . . ."

"Now there's suspicion that Bobby may have done it."

"I suppose he could have. There's a pattern, isn't there? His mom was crippled, my mom was in a wheelchair, and this Mr. Capstone was more of the same. Maybe the shock of what happened to his folks drove him around the bend, or maybe he was the one responsible for what happened to them to start with, and the other two murders were just a way of reenacting the crime. I wonder which it was."

"I doubt we'll ever know," Ehrengraf said gently.

"I guess not," McCandless said. "What we do know is I didn't kill anybody, and I already knew that, thanks to you. Bobby killed my parents, and my grandparents both had simple accidents. That's what the police decided at the time, and it was only my own negative thoughts about myself that led me to believe I had anything to do with their deaths."

"That's it," Ehrengraf said, delighted. "You're absolutely right."

"I'll tell you, Mr. Ehrengraf, this business with affirmations is pretty amazing stuff. I mean, I did some bad things over the

years. Let's face it, I pulled some mean stuff. But do you know why?"

"Tell me, Dale."

"I did it because I thought I was bad. I mean, if you're a bad person, what do you do? You do bad things. I thought I was bad, so I did some bad things."

"Give a dog a bad name—"

"And he'll bite you," McCandless said. "And I did, in a manner of speaking, but I never killed anybody. And now that I know I'm innocent, I'll be a changed human being entirely."

"A productive member of society."

"Well, I don't know about productive," McCandless said. "I mean, face it, I'm a rich man. Between what I had from my grandmother and what I stand to inherit from my parents, I can live a life of ease." He grinned. "Even after I pay your fee, I'm still set for life."

"An enviable position to be in."

"So I may not knock myself out being productive," McCandless went on. "I may just focus on having fun."

"Boys will be boys," said Ehrengraf.

"You said it. I'll work on my suntan, I'll see that the bar's well stocked, I'll round up a couple of totally choice babes. Get some good drugs, plenty of tasty food in case anybody gets the munchies, and next thing you know—"

"Drugs," Ehrengraf said.

"Hey, it's like you said, Mr. Ehrengraf. Boys will be boys."

"Suppose you got hold of some of that EKG."

"Suppose I did? I'm innocent, Mr. Ehrengraf. You're the one showed me how to see that. Anything I do, drunk or sober, straight or loaded, it's going to be innocent. So what have I got to worry about?"

He grinned disarmingly, but Ehrengraf was not disarmed. "I'm not sure EKG is a good idea for you," he said carefully.

"You could be right. But sooner or later it'll be around, and I won't be able to resist it. But so what? I can handle it."

Ehrengraf reached for the yellow legal pad, turned to a clean sheet, drew a line down the center of the page. "Here," he said, handing the pad to McCandless. "This time I'd like you to work with a different affirmation."

"How about 'I am a perfect child of God'? I sort of like the sound of that one."

"Let's try something a little more specific," Ehrengraf suggested. "Write, 'I am through with EKG, now and forever.'"

McCandless frowned, shrugged, took the pad and started writing. Ehrengraf, watching over his shoulder, read the responses as his client wrote them. *I am through with EKG, now and forever. / You must be kidding. . . . I am through with EKG, now and forever. / I love the way it makes me crazy. . . . I am through with EKG, now and forever. / I'll never give it up. . . . I am through with EKG, now and forever. / What harm does it do? . . . I am through with EKG, now and forever. / I couldn't resist it.*

"We have our work cut out for us," Ehrengraf said. "But that only shows how deep the thought goes. Look at the self-image you had earlier, and look how you managed to turn it around."

"I know I'm innocent."

"And the world has changed to reflect the change in your own mental landscape. Once you became clear on your innocence, proof of it began to manifest in the world around you."

"I think I see what you mean."

Ehrengraf handed the legal pad back to his client. The process would work, he assured himself. Soon the mere thought of ingesting EKG would be anathema to young Dale McCandless.

And that, Ehrengraf thought, would be all to the good. Because he had a feeling the world would be a kinder and gentler place for all if the innocent Mr. McCandless never ingested that particular chemical again. ③



"I attribute my long life to careless police work. They never nabbed me for someone I bumped off back in '26."

NO PARKING

by Jeffry Scott

M

uch as I value his company and expertise, McKell's friendship is a mixed blessing.

You can do without a buddy who enjoys puncturing self-esteem and destroying confidence. That is the snag about amity: Enemies' jibes may be dismissed as sheer malice, but friends must be taken seriously, so their comments are more hurtful. . . .

Tom McKell gains boundless pleasure from teasing me about crime fiction. Which is my bread and occasional butter. He loves whodunits and cops-'n'-robbers, he alleges. Whether on the TV screen or in print, they raise his spirits—"However blue I'm feeling, never takes long for me to start chuckling."

Crime writers are funnier than sitcom scribes, Inspector McKell maintains. Less through getting police procedure wrong (though we do, constantly) than by inflicting grievous bodily harm on way-things-are likelihood, peddling false stereotypes.

Take informers, grasses. Never mind that few criminals talk about grasses or grassing, unless their hobby happens to be lawn care. Policemen, too, are less than keen on the slang, finding it passé. That is not the point, however: McKell is tickled by the fact that informers are generally presented as male, and unprepossess-

Readers often ask where authors get ideas for their stories: British writer Jeffry Scott is fortunate in having an occupation in which all sorts of useful material comes across his desk every day. He has been a newspaper reporter for some thirty years, "holding down every writing job in Fleet Street: general reporter, foreign correspondent (including a two-year stint in the *Daily Mail's* New York bureau) TV and film critic, entertainments editor, and, currently, book editor." No wonder his stories are so rich! ¶

ing. Their eyes, even if not close-set, have a shifty gleam. These are creatures of the shadows, morally and often literally. Almost by definition, your typical grass lives in fear.

All of which is a caricature wrapped up in a cliché, according to the expert. Police informers are as unisex-diverse as the rest of society. They may well be in it for the money, but then which of us is not? Most people, McKell argues, earn wages or draw salaries and could be labelled as mercenaries. . . .

"That's all very well," I objected the last time he was mocking me, "but readers aren't going to believe in a gra—an informer who is respectable, attractive, and wears a dress. That would be downright unconvincing."

"A pity," Inspector McKell observed, drier yet, "because Tania Wark convinced *me*. And I've been accused of any amount of stuff in my time, but seldom gullibility. . . ."

Having gone that far, he agreed to tell me the rest. In confidence, naturally, so I haven't the slightest hesitation in sharing it, give or take changed names and altered biographies. Having dreamed up so many villains, I'm not scared by them—but libel lawyers make my blood run cold.

Tom McKell used to be senior CID officer at Longdown—effectively the boss, since his supervisor, a detective superintendent, was based elsewhere.

Scorning nostalgia, McKell claims that Longdown had all the shortcomings of a country town (no live theatre to speak of, bar Christmas pantomimes; positively no opera or ballet) plus many disadvantages of London. Before the Cold War thawed and peace of a kind broke out, Longdown was awash with money from three different defense factories on its outskirts, and affluence encouraged predators. The place even sheltered a few professional and quite formidable criminals.

"London in microcosm," McKell comments, "without the fun and glamour, such as there is. Oh yes, and the one-way traffic system was a nightmare, parking unspeakable. Made it very difficult to go shopping in Longdown without getting a parking ticket." (McKell tends to have reasons for the tiniest of small talk, so I ought to have tucked parking problems away for reference—it would have saved me getting left behind later on.)

"I suppose," he muses, "the layout of the place displeased me. There was no *there* to Longdown, somehow. Travellers tell me Los

Angeles has the same quality. Everything mixed up—the nick I worked out of, Central, was on Castle Hill. The main fire station was next door to us, with some posh department stores over the road. So you'd think that was the center of town, or at least the administrative and snobby quarter. Except that the council offices were a mile the other side of town, alongside the glitziest boutiques. But most of the cinemas were somewhere else again, with clubs and discos in six other directions. Higgle-dy-piggle-dy, scrambled, Longdown was.

"Little islands with a purpose to them, and a sea of houses, workshops, and so forth, in between. Pig of a manor to get a handle on. Longdown was prosperous but only half awake. Yet as soon as you needed to go anywhere in a hurry, a traffic jam developed. In one respect, though, Longdown was exactly like the village where I started the job. Those little islands made it far smaller than its physical size—everybody knew who I was and what I did. And some of them weren't backward in coming forward . . ."

Inspector McKell had fallen into the habit of getting a lift to work from his wife, who'd take their car on to her office. He had the use of official vehicles while on duty but lunch hours stranded him between the devil of a dreary canteen and the deep blue sea of a sinfully expensive restaurant where only the bill would be free of restaurant-French. Rival establishments were a long walk away.

Being crafty (and frugal) Inspector McKell brought sandwiches in his briefcase. Weather permitting, he lunched in Castle Hill Park. "I'm not antisocial, but you need daily fresh air and peace and quiet. I do, leastways."

One lunchtime he was absorbed in his paperback *Pickwick Papers* when a shadow fell across the page. "Fancy bumping into you," Tania Wark trilled. "My, your bench does look inviting, so cosy and secluded." She sat close enough for a knee to graze his thigh. "I hope Mrs. McKell doesn't hear about this and get the wrong idea." He was mildly surprised that his book's pages stayed dormant, her false eyelashes were fanning so vigorously.

McKell had been interested in Tania Wark for a month or more. Many men found her eminently fanciable. While bold-eyed blondes with good bodies never lack for admirers, the inspector's interest was professional. He felt that Mrs. Wark had something on her mind, like a deal. Now he was sure of it.

Tania Wark hadn't happened to encounter him during a lunch-hour stroll. Her stiletto heels were not made for the shaggy turf and gravel paths of Castle Hill Park. Someone had told her where to find him alone and unobserved—inspiring Mrs. Wark to drive one and a half miles in order to meet him accidentally on purpose.

Not just a pretty face, she was a qualified pharmacist and ran a chemists shop at Appleyard, one of the town's better suburbs. Tania's leisure time was less prim. McKell knew her from Longdown's after-hours drinking club. Mr. Wark—he owned the pharmacy—was a homebody who permitted his wife to behave like a single. Possibly he welcomed her nights on the town as a respite.

Smiling politely, Inspector McKell closed his book and studied her. "Penny for your thoughts!" she cried, when the silence grew long enough to embarrass her, though not him.

"I never think off duty," McKell lied.

Tania Wark edged away, jawline firming. But along with that went an aura of new respect. Eyes closed, pretending to sunbathe, she spoke dreamily. "Being a cop—policeman, you must be a good judge of character. Wish I was. People are always surprising me. I'm a t'riffic people-watcher. Stuck behind a shop counter, it's either that or go crazy from boredom."

Now she faced him again. Gaze level, lips parted, eyebrows slightly raised in implicit cue for him to suggest other cures for boredom. He'd dealt with many Tania Warks in his time, learning that flirtation was their reflex response to male company. That, or a negotiator's protective mask.

Mrs. Wark rambled on, "I usually get customers wrong, that's the funny part. Executives turn out to be hooligans and vice versa. Angel-faced kids are the worst shoplifters. Even customers I know pretty well, or thought I did, are full of surprises.

"Case in point, Ivy Challis—I only mention her because you know Ivy, too. By sight, anyway; she's often been in Captain Hook's when I've noticed you in there. Redhead, terribly attractive, could have been a model. She's a *great* friend of Ivor Grange . . . rest his soul."

Inspector McKell's fisherman's instinct tingled, but he made no comment on her mixture of tenses in referring to Grange. "Hope I'm not talking out of turn, saying that—rest his soul, I mean. Ivor hasn't been around for days and days, and there are horrible rumours he might . . . have had an accident?"

"I keep hearing the same. Small world."

Mrs. Wark laughed angrily, a breathy yelp. "You'd be a dead loss on those TV talk shows, making me do all the work."

"But," he countered blandly, "I'm a grand listener."

Contriving to keep her temper, she started over. "Ivy is ever so elegant. I mean, you'd expect her to be into champagne and caviar, coming on so classy. But would you believe it, I've sold her, oh, pounds and pounds' worth of baby food recently. The slop in those little jars?" After a longish wait, Tania Wark finished lamely, "It just goes to show, eh?"

"Maybe she's pregnant. Don't women get strange cravings then?"

"Ivy lumber herself with a baby? I doubt it, dear. And she's a teeny bit mature to get broody." Mrs. Wark hesitated, and he noted a sharp intake of breath before her next, hurried speech. "Actually, I'm a bit worried about Ivy. She seems *stressed*. Wanted me to sell her painkillers, powerful stuff you can't get without a prescription. I was unable to oblige, of course." For an instant Tania sounded schoolgirl-virtuous, in comical contrast to her heavy perfume, strident makeup.

"Of course not," Inspector McKell agreed.

"Good," she said briskly, as if they had struck a bargain. Her smile became almost natural. "Nice to chat like this. Maybe we can do it again. When I come across anything to interest you. And I'm sure I will."

"I don't doubt it." He hoped that Tania perceived the silent sub-text as, "There had better be." He was sure that she had. Not an admirable woman; by the same token, not stupid. Tom McKell scribbled on a scrap of paper. "Home number, and the other is my direct line. Phones have ears, remember, so fix up a meet when you feel like a nice chat."

At this early stage of the narrative (balder and more factual in McKell's mouth, but my version is accurate) I called time out, on grounds of bafflement. "This is supposed to be about a grass. The way you tell it, the Wark woman told you nothing in particular and no money changed hands."

Tom McKell looked pained. "Then you didn't listen right. She told me ever so much, and having told it, laid herself open to be squeezed for more. As for money, she expected her money's worth."

He sighed and shook his head. "Look, for good and sufficient reasons we were very anxious to locate Ivor Grange. He had been

involved in a major brawl and taken a severe beating a few days before La Wark confided in me. Longdown's jungle drums suggested that Grange had crawled away to die—unless somebody had finished the job and buried the evidence. All the usual tales were circulating: His body was part of a motorway bridge foundation, or sailing the English Channel in an oil drum.

"I didn't let on to Tania, but we believed the rumours had substance. Ivor Grange was Ivy Challis's fancy man, lived with her at Longdown insomuch as he had any fixed abode. Her home ought to have been his foregone refuge after a fight. But she denied seeing him again after he went out for a drink on the night he disappeared. She invited me to confirm that Grange wasn't in her house, and I did. What's more, Ivy was ringing Central every day, asking if we had news of him.

"Then up popped Tania Wark with two tasty bits of news, count 'em—Grange was still alive, and his girlfriend knew where he was. That's what her artless chatter about baby food signified. Get your teeth broken, maybe a fractured jaw into the bargain, that's the only slop you can handle. Especially if you daren't go to hospital or even a dentist, in case it puts the police on your tail."

"And the painkillers," I said, anxious to shine. "They weren't for Ivy Challis, she wanted them for her missing lover."

"Top of the class," the inspector commended sarcastically. "Of course when Mrs. Wark went out of her way to tell me she hadn't sold tablets to Ivy, it meant that she *had*. Probably charging well over the odds for the privilege. That's what I meant by Tania getting her money's worth. She'd scratched my back so . . . you know how the saying goes.

"Tania Wark was what you might call a sociable sort. Given the slightest encouragement, she'd have had my trousers off on that park bench, even if it was a business discussion. . . . Tania was popular for obvious reasons, but not with wives and girlfriends. Women like her have enemies. She reckoned that sooner or later one or more of them would tip us off about her dodgy dealings at the chemist's. She wasn't wrong, by the way: I'd already had a poison-pen letter about her, and one of my sergeants was sniffing around on the same line. So she was just in time, buying her insurance policy."

"That's corruption or conspiracy or something."

"No, it's the way things work in the real world," Tom McKell amended. "Don't get po-faced and give me the tut-tut routine.

Mrs. Wark wasn't operating a crack kitchen in her basement. Run a small retailing business these days, you have to cut corners or go under. Every item she sold was cheaper at the hypermarket near Longdown or any of the big outlets in town. So why did customers keep using her shop? Partly for convenience; it was just round the corner. Mainly because she did little favours, not just delivering medicine if a customer was housebound, but bending the rules when she thought it was safe. Like selling painkillers without benefit of prescription."

Reading my dubious expression, he shrugged. "If it consoles you, I wasn't giving Tania Wark a free rein, and she knew it. But she could be fairly sure that if she kept her nose clean in future, and me supplied with titbits—bear in mind that mixing with loads of fellers, she was bound to hear things—then my investigation into previous misdeeds might be, let's say, cursory."

Grimacing, he reached for the scotch. "I love telling war stories to civilians. Dotting every i and crossing the t's, holding their hand and leading them through the maze. You really are innocents. Look, d'you want to hear what happened or pig out on moral indignation, 'Our police aren't so wonderful,' all that good stuff?"

Ivor Grange was a Londoner who happened to spend a great deal of time in Longdown. It wasn't that he'd made the capital too hot to hold him—more to do with being too lazy and arrogant to travel to Streatham in South London, where his main associate lived.

The payroll job had not been enormous, under £100,000 taken in an armed raid on an aircraft factory outside Longdown. But then, it wasn't a very big gang: Grange, an unidentified getaway driver, and a certain Tosh Fisher.

"We knew it was Grange and Fisher. From experience, and I'm only speaking of my county's Force, I would say that in half the professional robberies we know exactly who is responsible—sooner than their wives or girlfriends, most often."

"Proving it, though . . . Grange was a prudent fellow. Kept his head, didn't spend like a drunken sailor the moment he scored. Nor run a flash car, own a big house. Fairly unusual for a bandit. Tosh Fisher was nearer your standard London toerag, but until then he'd done what Ivor Grange told him to. Not Fisher's forte, playing second fiddle, but it paid dividends for years, so he seemed loyal. Grange and Fisher had alibis. Checkmate. Or rather it

might have been, if Tosh Fisher had been blessed with a grain of patience and self-discipline. Only a half-share of one hundred K—near enough half, their driver would have been on a flat fee—got Fisher's greed glands in an uproar. Easy money and sex, where would us poor coppers be without them? Fisher was courting a beautiful girl, and being homely and pushing sixty to her twenty-three, he guessed that abundant cash might work better than just changing his aftershave, buying her a bouquet."

Here Inspector McKell made a brief detour to explain that he was citing this case not to show himself on top form—for he rated his performance as poor—but to demonstrate how different real "grasses" are from those I invent.

"For instance, we knew about Fisher from his ex-wife. She was a Longdown girl who moved back there after the divorce. But she stayed in close touch with Tosh Fisher's dear old mum. The ex-Mrs. Fisher lived for the day he would come unstuck, and wasn't above urging it along, as far as she was able. We never paid her a penny, mark you, but money was the motivation—she wasn't getting as much as she wanted from him. . . .

"Anyway, his former wife whispered that Tosh Fisher had promised his mama a nice holiday abroad, soon as his latest ship came home. He'd sussed out a caper involving a pay office—meaning Ivor Grange had set it up, but Tosh liked posing as the ideas man.

"And Tosh's mum, poisonous old bat, moaned to her former daughter-in-law that she'd be lucky to get a week in Brighton, despite his big talk. Because he was obsessed with this young tart and meant to buy his way between the sheets.

"Now, Grange and Fisher had pulled all their previous jobs in London or Birmingham, so it never occurred to me that this forthcoming robbery would be local. We alerted both cities, but Brum and London are full of payroll locations, so it wasn't much of a warning. Then the Longdown factory was raided, and we felt pretty silly."

Shortly after the robbery, Ivor Grange was invited to assist with Longdown CID's enquiries. Grange claimed to have been at a golf driving range ten miles in the other direction at the time of the robbery. The range's manager confirmed that.

Interviewed at Streatham, Benjamin "Tosh" Fisher stated that he had played snooker at a hall there while the robbery was in

progress. Again, his presence was confirmed, for what little that was worth.

There matters stood . . . until fingerprint evidence emerged. McKell had watched the scene-of-crime officer laboriously dusting the robbery site, and dismissed it as a ritual akin to tossing a pinch of spilt salt over the left shoulder to avert bad luck. People had been in and out of the pay office all day; the masked robbers had worn surgical gloves. But Inspector McKell, not for the first time in the case, was wrong.

"It was a million-to-one chance," he says. "The pay office had a broad counter like a Western saloon. When the robbers burst in, one stayed by the door and his partner vaulted over the counter. For a moment his weight was poised on his hand, splitting the thin rubber over the ball of his thumb.

"After he'd tossed the money into a bag and thrown it to the man at the door, he clambered over the counter again, planting three-quarters of a perfect thumbprint through the hole in the glove. Ivor Grange's thumb: not just his loops and whorls, but a distinctive scar."

Unfortunately, between incompetence and pressure of work, that finding was not passed on until forty-eight hours later. By then, Tom McKell had the distinct impression that Grange was dead.

The Waterman's Arms was a genteel pub, a credit to Longdown. Most of the takings were generated by its restaurant, which featured in several good-food guides.

So the owners, a gay retired architect and his personable young chef, were horrified when a fight broke out. It might have stayed a covert settling of scores in the unlit car park if Cyril Donahee hadn't stepped outside to clear his head. . . .

"Oi," he shouted, "three onto one's not fair." And by his own account, Donahee, six-foot-two and overweight for his height, "sort of pushed" one of the brutal attackers.

The man turned on him. Donahee jumped back just in time before retreating. He did not want to reason with a yard of motor-bike drive-chain used as a flail. Cyril Donahee, angry over bullying and even angrier at fleeing from it, counterattacked ninety seconds later with five fellow members of Longdown Rugby Football Club's first team, who liked brawling even better than gourmet food.

When the police arrived, the rugger players held the field and the enemy had dispersed. Tosh Fisher was picked up a quarter-mile along the riverside path, unable to disperse far because his ankle was sprained.

The uniformed sergeant rang Inspector McKell as soon as Fisher was identified. The sergeant proposed to charge Tosh Fisher with making an affray; Cyril Donahee, who'd done his share of making it, was a magistrate's son and local hero besides, claiming to have intervened in a mugging and then conducted spirited self-defense; he escaped with a warning.

"I ought to get a medal," Donahee asserted when Tom McKell quizzed him later that evening. "The fellow was in a terrible state. Trying to stay on his feet, but they were really laying into him, they'd broken his jaw, you could tell from the way it hung down . . . More blood than skin showing on his face. They were animals, using chains and I'm pretty sure one guy had a razor—"

"Very likely, but I'm interested in the victim's identity."

"Dunno, he was a terrible mess when I saw him. Must have dragged himself away when we started mixing it with the other three. I'm amazed he could move at all."

Pressed for a description, Cyril Donahee scratched his head. "It was dark, just the light from the pub door, and you know how it is in a ruck. . . . He had white hair, well, silvery. Struck me it wasn't natural, maybe a dye job, bit poufy on a feller."

"Ivor Grange," Inspector McKell muttered. "I thought it would be."

Tosh Fisher was in a cell at Central, waiting for his London solicitor to appear. "I think you were provoked," McKell needed, with small hope of it working. "Grange cheated you out of your half of the payroll job, you were in order to take it out on his hide."

Mr. Fisher, broken, blood-plugged nose rendering him indistinct, retorted, "Dawk to by 'awyer, leeb be alode."

So Inspector McKell went in search of Ivor Grange, without success then or on subsequent days. "Grange was cute," he explained to me, "insisted on holding all the money and paying fellow members of the firm in dribs and drabs afterwards. Enough to keep them going, too little to splash out with. Wouldn't release the remainder until the dust settled. Tosh Fisher accepted the system until he began thinking below the belt instead of above: Needing to dazzle his popsy, he demanded his total share right away. It

didn't take much working out. Grange had held firm, so Tosh took a few pals along to beat a change of heart out of his partner.

"It was a damned nuisance, especially when that fingerprint evidence turned up. But for Fisher's greed, Ivor Grange would have been snugged up with Ivy Challis and a false sense of security, and we could have detained him easy as kiss-my-hand. But now he was on the run, not from us but from Fisher and company . . . All very messy and unsatisfactory."

When Grange had been missing for four days, Inspector McKell went back to Ivy Challis. The house had a pretentiously pillared frontage, its interior evoking a furniture store display, expensive without being homelike.

"You don't have to tell me," she replied edgily when McKell said it was a bad business, and looking worse for her lover with every passing hour. Pampered, groomed, Ivy had a disciplined cloud of auburn hair, green eyes, spectacular legs, all set off by a redhead's pale skin, creamed, lotioned, and toned to perfection. It was hard to believe that she was pushing forty.

"Search all over again if you like," she offered, "I wish Ivor *was* here." She twisted the diamond ring around a long finger, as if trying to saw through it. "If it hadn't been for that fight I'd be telling you to get lost. But he must be hurt. On my mother's eyes, Mr. McKell, if he comes home or calls me, you will be the first to know. I don't want him arrested—but at least you lot aren't out to kill Ivor. I've got this instinct he is hurt bad and needs a hospital. He might finish with me for giving him away but I don't care, long as he's all right in the end."

McKell had believed her. The clincher coming when, eyes wet, Ivy Challis faltered, "He is just . . . you know, only hurt, isn't he?"

"I hope so, Ivy. From what I hear, he was in a bad way when last seen."

"And that damned pub is by the river . . ."

"We've dragged it, dear. Your feller didn't fall in." (He did not mention to Ivy the theory that Tosh Fisher's heavies had taken Grange with them, aiming to dispose of a body. Having gone too far in trying to beat the loot out of him, they might have treated human wreckage as evidence to be destroyed.)

Ivy wasn't listening. "He knew Tosh was after him, some row or other, I didn't want to know. Safer for me, right? I begged him to stay home. But no, Ivor goes out on the booze. Reckoned he would be all right at The Waterman's, Tosh wouldn't look for him at a

classy pub." Her face twisted. "All this is down to Fisher! Not just the fight, you're after Ivor for that factory business, but he never had anything to do with it. Tosh gets up to strokes and always drags my Ivor in."

"That's as may be. All Fisher admits is fighting at the pub. Grange wasn't involved, Tosh says. He dropped in for a quick drink and got set on. Two passing strangers just happened to join in on Tosh's side, protecting him."

Ivy laughed bitterly. But when McKell urged, "You know more than you're letting on. . . . Be frank with me and I can really ruin Fisher's day," she shook her head. "All I know is you lot keep persecuting Ivor. Just find him and get him to a doctor—*please*."

"She played me like an old violin," Inspector McKell admitted cheerfully. "I bought the whole act. Until Tania Wark marked my card about Ivy, that is. Then I caught on to how, um, parochial I had been: Ivor Grange wasn't at his mistress's house, therefore she was not sheltering him. But that was tunnel vision, blinkered to anything outside Longdown."

"Thanks to naughty Mrs. Wark, I cast my mental net a little wider. Ivy lived on my patch but along with a third or more of the population, she commuted to work in London. Soon as I took that aboard, it was obvious where Grange had to be hiding. It was a pain, since another Force was involved: You can't just go barging around the Met' Police's backyard, it bends them out of shape, makes 'em shrill and spiteful. Cap in hand, humble pie time, otherwise known as liaison and professional courtesy . . . Our Assistant Chief Constable spoke to his opposite number in The Smoke, and then we were off to the races. . . ."

Ivy Challis's reputation was spotless in Longdown. She explained, but only if asked, that she was housekeeper for a West End hotel group. Good salary, but it involved shift work, unsocial hours.

In reality, Ivy was a prostitute. She worked out of a cramped ground-floor apartment in an incurious block two or three streets behind Marble Arch. The previous year, a Met' Police colleague had asked Inspector McKell for background on a hooker calling herself Desire, whose car number turned out to be identical to that of a Mrs. Ivy Challis. If a redheaded Mrs. Challis did live in Longdown and owned a car with that number, she could be elimi-

nated from an investigation. There had been no need for McKell to question her, so she was unaware of his background knowledge.

In the West End next day, McKell and one of his sergeants met up with Inspector Pete Peters of the Met', flanked by a brace of burly young men in leather jackets. Thin-faced, crew-cut, crafty, and slangy, Peters looked more of a villain than most villains. He and Tom McKell were by way of being friends, after a couple of shared Home Office courses.

Inspector Peters crowed, "Bless my soul, if it isn't the Kevlar Kid!" The day was warm, but wirily angular McKell wore a rain-coat buttoned to the collar, turning him weirdly bulky for the size of his head, rather like a winter robin with its feathers fluffed out. The sergeant being well-fleshed in the first place, his bullet-resistant jacket was less evident under a tweed topcoat.

"The subject's an armed robber, possibly badly hurt and therefore erratic, certainly in fear of his life," Inspector McKell said stiffly. "Better safe than sorry."

"Providing he doesn't pop you between the jolly old horns," Pete Peters retorted, unabashed. "Lady at her place of business, is she? My boys have been keeping observation since nine this morning, didn't clock her going in. On the other hand, those flats are a right rabbit-warren . . . corner site with an alley behind, loads of doors.

"Hooker heaven, best part of a hundred apartments, and at least thirty of the tenants are brasses. We couldn't afford a drum there, and don't forget Les Girls pay a whacking great rent for cribs they're using maybe eight hours a day, not every day of the week. Goes to prove what the wages of sin is—money, now there's a surprise."

His minions sniggered dutifully.

Wishing that Pete Peters were less fond of talking, Inspector McKell said, "Ivy Challis left her house at eight this morning, took the London road. She must be in there by now." They were huddled opposite the apartment block; he spoke while staring across the street. He had wanted to raid the flat in the early hours: Ivor Grange would be at his lowest ebb then and presumably alone. But arranging a joint operation and getting the search warrant had eaten time.

"You can't see her drum from here," said Peters. "Her window's round the back, looks out on a courtyard—air-well with ideas above its station, really. I borrowed the plans from the letting agent."

Inspector Peters spread the sheet on the roof of his low-slung car. "Turn left off the reception area and Ivy Challis's is the third door along this corridor." Reversing the paper, he disclosed another schematic. "Layout of the flat: tiny little lobby, lounge with an alcove off it, just room for cooker and sink. Open stairs at the right of the lounge, seven steps to the bedroom—meaning a bed on a balcony affair, a big ledge. Bathroom and lav *en suite*, it says in the brochure, which comes out as a tacky concertina door, fabric on steel ribs, over here at the end of the sleeping area, that ledge. Shower stall and lavatory behind the concertina door."

Folding the blueprint, Peters drew Tom McKell clear of the group. "We have a lot more experience and this is our patch. Let me and my hounds have a bit of fun, you come in straight afterwards." Squinting in concentration, voice lowered, Inspector Peters was wholly serious. "I've drawn," (signifying that he was armed and had sanction for the weapon) "and I'm not married with two kids."

McKell grinned, praying that his churning stomach wouldn't betray him by audible growling. "Pushy blokes like you need taking down a peg—wait your turn like a little gent."

"Well, I tried." Peters expected nothing else, though the offer had been sincere. He slapped his breast pocket. "Got the search warrant, in case you wondered. Might as well do it. . . ."

Returning to the car, he ordered, "Off you go, kids. This guy has been known to carry, he may come steaming out through the window, so heads up. I want a trouble-free shift and us all getting off early, I have this date with Julia Roberts."

"Dream on," floated back as the twosome loped away.

Pete Peters looked down his nose at McKell. "City style, please. Forget the bell, 'I am a police officer,' and all that lark. Let's have the door bust sharpish, and get right to it."

"Suits me." Yet McKell hesitated, appalled by his oversight. "I should have tried phoning the flat, see if she's there."

"Been done. She's got cards in phone boxes from here to Piccadilly. No more Desire, she's Ember these days: 'Ember is hot for you . . .' and the phone number of that flat. I've been calling it since you spoke to me yesterday, tried again just now. Sexy-voiced answering machine every time—I'm not available, but Princess Paprika will give you just as good a time, I'm hot but she's molten,' and punters get another number to try."

Inspector McKell pondered before nodding to himself. "She's in

there, all right, and not alone. She's turning trade away, but she's still been coming to London regularly since he vanished. Nursing him, and she can't hide Grange from clients in a one-room apartment."

"Seems reasonable." Peters winked at McKell's sergeant, who was carrying a cricket bag. From the strain on its leather handles, something weightier than bat and pads was within. "Brought your key, then. Good lad."

Outside the apartment door, Inspector Peters prostrated himself like an Arab at prayer, sniffing at the crack between door and carpet. "Somebody's home," he whispered. "Radio going full blast, and I smell cigarettes. Funny ones, unless it's joss-sticks. Maybe your guy's using grass for anaesthetics." He straightened lithely. Then, breath warm in Tom McKell's ear: "Two locks, both rubbish. Your guy know his stuff?"

McKell, who'd had just about enough of his colleague, grunted, "Now's the time to find out." He undid the top buttons of the raincoat, sliding his hand into his belt holster and confirming by touch that the gun's safety catch was on. Pete Peters, nodding, moved to the other side of the door.

"All yours, Tim," McKell mouthed. His sergeant, lips pursed thoughtfully, pressed spread fingers between the two locks. Removing the sledgehammer from the bag, he stepped back and swung expertly, once, twice . . . Changed his grip, using the hammer's head in battering-ram fashion.

The door flew open.

Revolver out, McKell crossed the minuscule lobby in a long stride. "Armed police! Stay still!"

Broad daylight outdoors, but the apartment's lined curtains were closed and a single baby spot in the array of track lights was the sole illumination. The space, reeking of incense, was shadowy except for that vertical shaft of radiance in the middle of the room, mercilessly bright.

Shock froze him for a heartbeat. Bald, faceless, gleamingly naked, a creature was confronting him: a beast disturbed while savaging fallen prey. Inspector McKell's mind shut down momentarily, like a camera shutter snapping. He flinched from recognising the mutilated quarry being guarded by this apparition.

He might, Tom McKell confessed to me years later, have stayed frozen for a second or an hour. But Pete Peters, jammed with the sergeant back in the lobby, shouted desperately.

McKell understood, in a strangely detached manner, that the creature wasn't an animal after all. Humanoid, it had risen on two legs, it was advancing, and it brandished a kitchen knife, a narrow triangle of honed steel some seven inches long from tip to grip, and the silver was sweeping up, up—

Belatedly the spell broke. His brain snicked back into gear and he perceived what he was dealing with. Being right-handed, with no time to switch the revolver to his left, Inspector McKell took his finger off the trigger, ducked under the descending blade, and clubbed his weighted fist against the side of the alien creature's muzzle.

He even had enough presence of mind to catch Ivy Challis as she collapsed. While laying her down, a detached observer in his head noted that the floor wasn't glistening from water, it was just that most of the carpet was covered by a sheet of clear plastic.

A cracked voice announced, "Panic over, chaps." Holstering the revolver, he was disturbed to discover that he was the speaker.

Pete Peters, Adam's apple abruptly prominent, choked out, "Sweet Jesus, what is all this?" Shaken but professional, he bolted back to the corridor before throwing up; crime scenes must not be compromised.

"You had to be there," McKell said, either shrugging or shivering. "Ivy didn't want her clothes stained by the messy task she had taken on, so she stripped, put on a shower cap and a skintight, see-through PVC catsuit, part of her working wardrobe. With just that one light, and no makeup on, she scared seven kinds of spit out of me. And there were scores of those joss-sticks you get at Chinese stores, smouldering away to cover the smell, and they made the flat sort of foggy.

"She swore she hadn't been trying to knife me, just making for the door in a panic to escape. Small consolation if she had skewered me, but I didn't argue. The lady was in enough trouble without my twopenny-worth."

Seeing the question on my face, he said patiently, "Ivy had killed Ivor Grange about an hour before we turned up. She needed to smuggle the body out—dismemberment struck her as the best means. 'I could have managed a bit at a time,' she told me, might have been talking about materials for a garden bonfire. 'Ivor was too big to get into the boot of my car, *I had to make him fit.*'"

He mimed another shudder. "Ice for a heart, that one. Then

again, having been used and abused by men all her life, maybe she saw it as getting her own back. All the same, I'm afraid Ivy was defective when she came off the assembly line. Good to look at but it stopped at the looks—not fully human.

"For instance, I asked how she could have done such a thing, meaning killing and mutilation. Her late boyfriend was minus arms and legs when we broke in; she'd been having a breather before taking his head off, if you please. How anyone could bring themselves to . . . well, it was beyond me.

"But she got the wrong end of the stick, thought I was being sexist, surprised that all women aren't squeamish. The, um, moral dimension was invisible to Ivy. 'Oh,' she said, quite proud of herself, 'Dad was a butcher, I knew how to go about it. And I work out a lot, I'm stronger than I look.'"

"God, how awful."

"I don't believe God was anywhere near Apartment 3A, Rougemont Court, that particular day." But McKell's smile, sardonic, hardly perceptible, soon vanished. "You can drive yourself dotty over maybes and might-have-beens, so I try not to wonder exactly what part I played in Grange's death.

"Until Tania Wark's tip-off, I'd accepted that Ivy Challis had no idea where Grange might be. I have a nasty feeling that was the green light. We believed Grange had been knocked off in a dispute with another crook; if his corpse *was* found, Tosh Fisher had to be prime suspect. Granted, we picked Fisher up immediately after the fracas at The Waterman's Arms, but he was granted bail the following day. For all we knew, he could have caught up with Grange later and finished what began at the pub.

"What really happened was that Grange got away after the brawl. He dared not go to Ivy's house, first place Fisher would look for him. Lord knows how, but badly hurt as he was, Grange got himself to Ivy's crib, the London flat. Likeliest explanation is that anonymous wheelman I mentioned, the getaway driver we never caught up with.

"In hindsight, I believe Grange went to The Waterman's to pay off the driver. Probably the guy bottled out when Fisher turned up with his lynch mob, but hung around at a safe distance and rescued Grange when he had the chance, after those rugger hearties intervened. The driver took Ivor Grange to London."

McKell paused, raising an index finger. "Interesting point: Grange had a key to Ivy's crib—but he wasn't her pimp, and it

was a lousy potential hideout, considering her trade. We'll come back to that in a minute.

"He was in a bad way, front teeth splinters and pulp, broken jaw, but Ivor was a tough nut, confident he'd recover providing he stayed ahead of Tosh Fisher. Grange knew a dodgy doctor who would fix him up on the quiet, but the quack was out of town for a while. Grange phoned Ivy, demanded her help, and settled down to wait for the doc.

"Fair play, Ivy Challis did her best at first. But she wasn't much of a nurse, and he was a rotten patient, half crazy from pain. He whacked her a time or two for clumsiness, and fairly soon—her version, this—he stopped talking and sulked on the bed, day and night.

"Ivy didn't like being knocked about. And she was turning business away to give Grange a safe house, losing money for his sake. Then rumours started about Tosh Fisher being mixed up in Grange's disappearance, and the poison began working. The idea hit her that there's no risk in murdering a man who is assumed to be dead already. Grange was weak but bound to get stronger as time passed; she'd never have a better chance."

"But why kill him?" I objected. "If she wanted revenge she could have had it simply by telling you where to find him."

Tom McKell was pitying. "Ivy wasn't after revenge, no money in that. You haven't listened, old son. Grange was canny, didn't sling his gelt around. *He stashed it away.*

"We went over that flat—which is to say the Met' did, they're great at searching. Sure enough, a steel box was hidden under the lounge floor. It held most of the hundred thousand from the payroll job, still in the delivery bags, and other cash besides. He had the best part of a quarter-million quid on deposit at his mistress's London address. She denied it, but Ivy must have guessed his stash was there. Whatever pretext Ivor Grange used to be alone in the flat, she'd spotted something, as it might be sawdust on a rug or a certain section of floor not quite the same as before. Women in her trade don't need many clues; what blood in the water is for sharks, the smell of money is to them.

"Right up to the trial, Ivy denied all knowledge of the payroll take because it was such a damning motive. She tried to sell us and her QC the tale that Grange was killed in self-defense. He'd lost his temper and tried to throttle her, she grabbed up a knife

and stabbed him. Then she panicked, fearing that nobody would believe her version, and started covering up. . . .

"Didn't work. The pathologist agreed there was a lot of damage to the body—how could he not? But Grange was smothered, not stabbed. Fibers from a pillowslip were caught on a broken tooth, and it was an exact match with the pillow on the bed. Forget lashing out; she crept up on him and put that pillow over his face and kept pressing.

"As if that wasn't enough, the knives and a cleaver she was using on the corpse had been brought from the kitchen of her house at Longdown, which exploded her spur-of-the-moment story."

McKell's expression was ambiguous. "The ironic part is, Ivy didn't need to knock him off. That's another thing the pathologist found out. Grange's scars and bruises were spectacular, but the worst damage was internal; he wasn't sulking, he was dying. Even if we had raided the flat in time to stop Ivy, Grange's prospect of recovery was nil by then. When she smothered him, he was already on the way out."

"Bit of a let-off for you," I sniffed. Some of McKell's previous remarks had stung. And he'd admitted that he had put the idea of murder into that woman's head, albeit unwittingly.

"If you choose to regard it in that light." No good at being stuffy, Tom McKell spread his hands. "I got there in the end. With some help from Tania Wark."

And a reflective moment later he muttered, "Idleness was what destroyed her."

"Tania Wark? What had she done?"

Inspector McKell blinked. "Nothing. I was talking about Ivy, she was the lazy one. They are lazy, professional criminals. Unless lazy is the wrong label and it's a matter of having a short attention span, same as those monkeys in *The Jungle Book*, if you're familiar with Kipling. The apes made great plans—and forgot 'em next moment. Crooks are like that: know the need for security, hence all the slang and thieves' argot invented so they can chatter in code. But time and again they spoil themselves. Take a cab right to the front door, too idle to walk a block and leave the cabbie ignorant about their destination. Or rather than destroying all clues at a hideout, they pay somebody to do the donkey work, only it never gets done—that was the Great Train Robbers. It all comes down to laziness.

"Ivy was just the same. She had to use Mrs. Wark's shop to get painkillers without a prescription, admittedly. But she could have picked up the baby food somewhere else, either in Longdown or, better still, London. Then she might well have got away with it. Instead, painkillers plus baby food made Tania Wark put two and two together, guaranteeing that Ivy was doomed even before she killed the man.

"I asked her why she hadn't done that, bought his special food from a big outlet. Didn't say Tania had split on her, naturally; I led Ivy to believe a customer overheard the order, sneaked to us about it.

"And," McKell challenged, "you'll never guess her reply, not in a hundred years. Ivy looks at me as if I'm a simpleton, and goes, 'But I was already *in* a chemist's for the pills, and Ivor's bloody baby food was handy, right under my nose. Catch me traipsing off into town just to get his grub—have you ever tried finding a parking space in the middle of Longdown on a weekday?"

"Though I don't believe in gloating over clients," said Inspector McKell, "Ivy tempted me sorely. So clever, working out where her fancy man kept his loot, taking advantage of thieves falling out . . . and stupid as they come.

"She saved herself a walk and didn't risk a parking ticket—that must be a great consolation in prison." ☉



CRASH DIET

Deborah Lee

"After they crashed in the mountains, they had to stay Alive !

(They ate the pilot—Captain Ralph Hamm—but strictly to survive.) The defendants were crazed by hunger, but the media's made much Of the fact that there were meals on board my clients didn't touch. Ladies and gentlemen of the jury, their logic may seem crude, But it's clear that it was self-defense . . . Ralph or airline food !"



THE KNEELING SOLDIER

by Jeffery Deaver

"H

e's out there? Again?"

A dish fell to the tiled kitchen floor and shattered.

"Gwen, go down to the rec room. Now."

"But, Daddy," she whispered, "how *can* he be? They said six months. They promised six months. At least!"

He peered through the curtains, squinting, and his heart sank. "It's him," he sighed. "It's him. Gwen, do what I told you. The rec room. Now." Then he shouted into the dining room, "Doris!"

His wife hurried into the kitchen. "What is it?"

"He's back. Call the police."

"He's back?" the woman muttered in a grim voice.

"Just do it. And Gwen, I don't want him to see you. Go downstairs. I'm not going to tell you again."

Doris lifted the phone and called the sheriff's office. She only had to hit one button; they'd put the number on the speed

dialer some months ago.

Ron stepped to the back porch and looked outside.

The hours after dinner, on a cool springtime evening like this, were the most peaceful moments of the year in Locust Grove. The suburb was a comforting thirty-two miles from New York City, on the North Shore of Long Island. Some truly wealthy lived here—new money and some Rockefeller and Morgan hand-me-downs. Then there were the aspiring rich and a few popular artists, some ad agency CEOs. Mostly, though, the village was made up of people like the Ashberrys. Living comfortably in their six-hundred-thousand dollar houses, commuting on the LIRR or driving to their management jobs at publishing or computer companies on Long Island.

This April evening found the dogwoods in bloom and the fragrance of mulch and the first-cut grass of the year filling the misty air. And it found the brooding form of Harle Ebbers crouching in the bushes across the street from Ron Ashberry's house, staring into the bedroom window of sixteen-year-old Gwen.

Oh, dear Lord, Ron thought hopelessly. Not again. It's not starting again . . .

Doris handed the cordless phone to her husband and he asked for Sheriff Hanlon. As he waited to be connected, he inhaled the stale metallic scent of the porch screen he rested his head against. He looked across his yard, forty yards, to the bush that had become a fixture in his daydreams and the focus of his nightmares.

It was a juniper, about six feet long and three feet high, gracing a small municipal park. It was beside this languorous bush that twenty-year-old Harle Ebbers had spent much of the last eight months, in his peculiar crouch, stalking Gwen.

"How'd he get out?" Doris wondered.

"I don't see what good it'll do," Gwen said from the kitchen,

For a twisty thriller no one tops Jeffery Deaver. With an HBO movie soon to air (from his book *A Maiden's Grave*), the author recently signed a second movie contract, this time with Martin Bregman at Universal Pictures, for a big-screen adaptation of his just-released novel *The Bone Collector* (Viking / March 1997). †

panic in her voice. "To call the police. He'll be gone before they get here. He always is."

"Go downstairs!" Ron called. "Don't let him see you."

The thin blond girl, her face as beautiful as Lladro porcelain, backed away. "I'm scared."

Doris, a tall, muscular woman, exuding the confidence of the competitive athlete she'd been in her twenties, put her arm around her daughter. "Don't worry, honey. Your father and I are here. He's not going to hurt you. You hear me?"

The girl nodded uncertainly and vanished down the stairs.

Ron Ashberry kept his gaze coldly fixed on the figure next to the bush.

It was a cruel irony that this tragedy had happened to Gwen.

Conservative by nature, Ron had always been horrified by the neglect he saw on the part of families in the city to which he commuted every day. Absent fathers, crack-addict mothers, guns and gangs, little girls turning to prostitution. He vowed that nothing bad would ever happen to his daughter. His plan was simple: He'd protect Gwen, raise her the right way, teach her good moral values, *family* values—which, thank God, people had started talking about again. He'd keep her close to home, make sure she got good grades, instruct her in everything a cultured young lady needed to learn—from sports to art to ordering in restaurants.

Then, when she turned eighteen, he'd give her freedom. She'd be old enough then to make the correct decisions—about boys, about careers, about money. She'd go to an Ivy League college and then return to the North Shore for marriage or a career.

This was serious work, hard work, this child rearing. But Ron was finally seeing the results of his efforts. Gwen scored in the 99th percentile in the PSATs. She never talked back to adults, never snuck cigarettes or liquor, never made an issue out of not getting her driver's license. She understood the reasons why he wouldn't let her go into Manhattan with her girlfriends unchaperoned or spend the weekend on Fire Island. And Ron was immensely proud of their relationship.

And so he felt it was utterly unfair that Harle Ebbers picked *his* daughter to stalk.

It had begun last fall. One evening Gwen had been particularly quiet throughout the evening meal. When Ron had asked her to go pick a book out of his library so he could read it aloud, Gwen just stood at the kitchen window, staring outside.

"Gwen, are you listening to me? I asked you to get me a book."

She'd turned and, to his shock, he saw she was crying.

"Honey, I'm sorry," Ron said automatically and stepped forward to put his arm around her. He knew the problem. Several days ago she'd asked if she could take a spring trip to Washington, D.C., with two teachers and six of the girls and boys from her social studies class. Ron had considered letting her go. But then he'd checked out the group and found that two of the girls had discipline problems—they'd been found drinking in a park near the school last summer. He'd told Gwen she couldn't go and she'd seemed disappointed. He assumed this was what troubled her today. "I wish I could let you go, Gwen—" he said.

"Oh no, Daddy, it's not that stupid trip. I don't care about that. It's something else . . ."

She fell into his arms, sobbing. He was filled with his overwhelming parental love. And an unbearable agony for her pain. "What is it, honey? Tell me. You can tell me anything."

She'd glanced out the window.

He followed her gaze and saw, in the park across the street, a figure crouching in the bushes.

"Oh, Daddy, he's following me."

Horried, Ron led her to the living room, calling out, "Doris, we're having a family conference! Come in here! Now!" He gestured his wife into the room then sat next to Gwen. Put his arm around her. "What is it, baby? Tell us."

Ron preferred that Doris pick up Gwen at school. But occasionally, if his wife was busy, he let Gwen walk home. There were no bad neighborhoods in Locust Grove, certainly not along the trim, manicured route to the high school; the greatest threats were usually aesthetic—a run-down bungalow or a flock of plastic flamingos or herds of plaster Bambis.

Or so Ron had believed.

That night Gwen sat with her hands in her lap, staring at the floor, and explained in a meek voice, "I was walking home today, okay? And there was this guy."

Ron's heart went cold. His hands began to shake and a fiery anger grew inside him.

"Tell us," Doris said. "What happened?"

"Nothing *happened*. Not like that. He just, like, started to talk to me. He's going, 'You're so pretty.' 'You're so beautiful.' 'Where do you live?'"

"Did he know you?"

"I don't think so. He acted all funny. Like he was sort of retarded, you know. Kind of saying things that didn't make sense. I told him you didn't want me to talk to strangers and I ran home."

"Oh, you poor thing." Her mother embraced her.

"I didn't think he followed me. But . . ." She bit her lip. "But that's him."

Ron had jogged toward the bush where he'd seen the young man. He was in a curious pose. It reminded Ron of the green plastic soldiers he used to buy when he was a kid. The kneeling soldier, holding his M1 carbine to his cheek. The boy saw Ron coming and fled.

Ron had called the sheriff's office and found out that they knew all about the boy. Ebbers's parents had moved to Locust Grove a few months before, virtually driven out of Ridgeford, Connecticut, because their son had targeted a young blonde, about Gwen's age, and had begun following her. The boy was of average intelligence but had suffered psychotic episodes when younger. The police hadn't been able to stop him because he'd only hurt one person in all his months of stalking—the girl's brother had attacked him, and Harle had beaten the boy nearly to death. But all charges were dropped on the grounds of self-defense.

The Ebbers family had at last fled the state, hoping to start over fresh.

But the only change was that Harle found himself a new victim.

The boy had fallen into his obsessive vigil: staring into Gwen's classrooms at school and perching beside the juniper bush, keeping his eyes glued to the girl's bedroom.

Ron had tried to get a restraining order but, without any illegal conduct on Harle's part, the magistrate couldn't issue one. The police harassed the young man, rousting him frequently, but he proved surprisingly knowledgeable about his rights and so they gave that up and settled for stepping up their patrols in the neighborhood.

Finally, after Harle had stationed himself beside the juniper bush for six nights straight, Ron stormed into the state Mental Health Department and demanded that something be done. The department implored the boy's parents to send him to a private-care hospital for six months. The county would pay ninety percent of the fee. The Ebbers agreed and, under an involuntary commitment order, the boy was taken off to Garden City.

But now he was back, kneeling like a soldier beside the infamous juniper bush, only one week after the ambulance had carted him off.

Finally Sheriff Hanlon came on the line.

"Ron, I was going to call you."

"You *knew* about him?" Ron shouted. "Why the hell didn't you tell us? He's out there right now."

"I just found out about it myself. The boy talked to a shrink at the hospital. Apparently he gave the right answers and they decided to release him. Keeping him any longer on a dicey order like that, there was a risk of liability for the county."

"What about liability for my daughter?" Ron spat out.

"There'll be a hearing in a few weeks, but they can't keep him in the hospital till then. Probably not after the hearing either, the way it's shaking out."

Tonight, as mist settled on the town of Locust Grove, this beautiful spring night, crickets chirped like greaseless gears, and Harle Ebbers was frozen in his familiar kneeling pose, dark eyes searching for a delicate young girl whose father happened to be deciding at that moment that this couldn't go on any longer.

"Look, Ron," the sheriff said sympathetically, "I know it's tough. But—"

Ron slammed the phone into the cradle, nearly tearing it from the wall.

"Honey," Doris began. He ignored her, and as he started for the door she took his arm. She was a strong woman, athletic. But Ron was stronger and he pulled away brusquely, pushed open the screen door, and started across the dewy lawn to the park.

To his surprise, and pleasure, Harle didn't flee. He stood up out of his crouching position and crossed his arms, waiting for Ron to approach.

Ron was athletic too. He played tennis and golf and he swam like a dolphin. One hundred laps a day when the country club pool was open. He was slightly shorter than Harle but, as he gazed at the boy's prominent eyebrows and disturbingly deep-set eyes, he knew in his heart that he could kill the young man. With his bare hands if he had to. All he needed was the slightest provocation.

"Daddy, no!" Gwen screamed from the porch, her voice like a high violin note, resonating through the mist. "Don't get hurt. It's not worth it!"

Ron turned back, hissed to his girl, "Get back inside!"

Harle was waving toward the house, "Gwennie, gwennie, gwennie . . .," a frightening grin on his face.

Neighbors' lights came on, faces appeared in windows and doorways.

Perfect, Ron thought. He makes the least gesture toward me, and I'll kill him. A dozen witnesses'll back me up.

He stopped two feet from Harle, on whose face the grin had fallen away. "I got sprung. They couldn't make it stick, could they? Make it stick, make it stick, couldn't make it stick. So I Got Sprung."

"You listen to me," Ron muttered, fists balling at his side: "You're real close. You know what I mean? I don't care if they arrest me, I don't care if they execute me. You don't leave her alone, I'm going to kill you. Understand?"

"I love my Gwennie, I love her, love her, loveher, loveher, lover, loverloverlover. She loves me, I love her she loves me I love she loves I love she loves she loves she loves shelovessheloves-shelovessssss . . ."

"Come on. Take a swing at me. Come on. Coward! Haven't got the guts to mix it up with a grownup, right? You make me sick."

Harle uncrossed his arms.

Okay, here it comes. . . .

Ron's heart flexed and an ocean crashed in his ears. He could feel the chill adrenaline race through his body like an electric current.

And the boy turned and fled.

Son of a bitch . . .

"Come back here!"

He was racing down the street on his lanky legs, disappearing into the misty dusk, Ron close behind him.

For a few blocks.

Athletic, yes, but a forty-three-year-old's body doesn't have the stamina of someone half that age, and after a quarter mile the boy pulled ahead and disappeared.

Winded, his side cramping fiercely from the run, Ron trotted back to the house, climbed into his Lexus. Gasping, he shouted, "Doris. You and Gwen stay here, lock the doors. I'm going to find him."

She protested, but he ignored her and sped out of the drive.

A half-hour later, having cruised throughout the entire neighborhood and finding no sign of the boy, he returned home.

To find his daughter in tears.

Doris and Gwen sat in the living room, the shades down and curtains drawn. Doris held a long kitchen knife in her strong fingers.

"What?" Ron demanded. "What's going on?"

Doris said, "Tell your father."

"Oh, Daddy, I'm sorry. I thought it was best."

"What?" Ron strode forward, dropping onto the couch, gripping his daughter by her shoulders. "Tell me!" he cried.

"He came back," Gwen said. "He was by the bush. And I went out to talk to him."

"You did what? Are you crazy?" Ron shouted, shaking with rage and fear at what might have happened.

He looked at Doris, who said, "I couldn't stop her. I tried, but—"

"I was afraid for you. I was afraid he'd hurt you. I thought maybe I could be nice to him and ask him please just to go away."

Despite his horror, a burst of pride popped inside of Ron Ashberry.

"What happened?" he asked.

"Oh, Daddy, it was terrible."

The feeling of pride faded and he sat back, staring at his daughter's white face. Ron whispered, "Did he touch you?"

"No . . . not yet."

"What do you mean, 'yet'?" Ron barked.

"He said . . ." Her tearful face looked from her father's furious eyes to her mother's determined ones. "He said that when it's the next full moon, that's when women get a certain way because of their, you know, monthly thing. The next full moon, he's going to find me wherever I am . . ." Her face grew red in shame. She swallowed. "I can't say it, Daddy. I can't tell you what he said he'd do."

"My God."

"I got so scared, I ran back to the house."

Her strong-jawed face looking out the window, Doris added, "And he just stood there, staring at us, kind of singing in this sick voice. We locked the doors right away." She nodded at the knife, setting it on the table. "I got that from the kitchen just in case."

She loves me, I love her she loves me I love she loves I love she loves she loves . . .

His wife continued, "Then you came back, and when he saw the car lights he ran off. It looked like he was headed toward his folks' house."

Ron grabbed the phone off the wall, hit speed dial.

"This is Ron Ashberry," he said to the police dispatcher.

"Yessir, is it the boy again?" she asked.

"Hanlon. Now."

A pause. "Hold, please."

The sheriff came on the line. "Ron, what the hell's going on tonight? I've had four calls from your neighbors about this thing."

Ron explained about the threats.

"It's still just words, Ron."

"Goddamn it, I don't care about the law! He said the night of the full moon he's going to rape my little girl. What the hell do you people want?"

"When's the full moon?"

"I don't know, how would I know?"

"Hold on a second. I've got an almanac. . . . Here we go. It's next week. We'll have somebody at your house all day. If he makes a move, we'll get him."

"For what? Trespass? And he'll be out in, what, a week?"

"I'm sorry, Ron. It's the law."

"You know what you and your law can do? You can go straight to hell."

"Mr. Ashberry, I've told you before, if you take things into your own hands, you're going to be in serious trouble. Now good night to you."

Ron jammed the phone into the cradle and this time it flew from the wall fixture.

He shouted to Doris, "Stay here. Keep the doors locked."

"Ron, what are you going to do?"

"Daddy, no . . ."

The door slammed so hard a pane cracked and the fissure lines made a perfect spiderweb.

Ron parked on the lawn, narrowly missing a rusting Camero and a station wagon, lime green except for the front fender, which was the matte color of dried-blood-brown primer.

Pounding on the scabby door, he shouted, "I want to see him. Open up!"

Finally the door swung open and Ron stepped inside. The bungalow was small and it was a mess. Food, dirty plastic plates, beer cans, piles of clothes, magazines, newspapers. A strong animal smell too.

He pushed past the diminutive couple, both wearing jeans and T-shirts. In their late thirties.

"Mr. Ashberry," the man said uneasily, looking at his wife.

"Is your son here?"

"We don't know. Listen, sir, we had nothing to do with him getting out of that hospital. We was all for keeping him there, as I think you know."

"What do you mean you don't know where he is?"

"He comes and goes," his wife said. "Through his bedroom window. Sometimes we don't see him for days."

"Ever try discipline? Ever try a belt? What is it, you think children should walk all over you?"

The father gave a mournful laugh.

His wife said, "Has he done something else?"

As if what he'd done wasn't enough. "Oh, he's just threatening to rape her, that's all."

"Oh, no, no," she clutched her hands together, fingers dirty and bedecked with cheap rings. "But it's just talk," the woman blurted. "It's always just talk, with him."

Ron whirled to face her. Her short black hair was badly in need of a wash; she smelled of sour onions. Her skin, not her breath. "It's gone past the talk stage and I'm not going to put up with it. I want to see him."

They glanced at each other and the father led him down a dark corridor toward one of the two bedrooms. Something—old food, it seemed—crunched under Ron's feet. The man looked over his shoulder, saw his wife standing in the living room, and said, "I'm so sorry for all this, sir. I truly am. I wish I had it in my heart to, you know, make him go away."

"We tried that," Ron said cynically.

"I don't mean a hospital or jail." His voice fell to a whisper. "To go away forever. You know what I mean. I've thought about it some. She has too but she doesn't say it. Being his mother and all. One night I almost done it. When he was asleep." He paused and caressed a crater in the Sheetrock, from a fist, it seemed. "I wasn't strong enough. I wished I was. But I couldn't do it."

His wife joined them and he fell silent. The father knocked timidly on the door and when there was no response he shrugged. "Ain't much we can do. He keeps it locked and won't give us a key."

"Oh, for God's sake." Ron stepped back and slammed his foot into the door.

"No!" the mother cried. "He'll be mad. Don't—"

The door crashed open and Ron stepped inside, flicking on the light. He stopped, astonished.

In contrast to the rest of the house, Harle's room was immac-

ulate. The bed was made and the blankets were taut as a buck private's. The desktop ordered and polished. The rug vacuumed. Bookshelves neat, and all the books were alphabetized.

"He does it himself," Harle's mother said with a splinter of pride. "Cleans up. See, he's not really so bad—"

"Not really so bad? Are you out of your mind? Look at that! Just look!"

On the walls were posters from World War Two movies, Nazi paraphernalia, swastikas, bones. A large bayonet dangled from the desk lamp. A miniature samurai sword sat on a footlocker. One poster was a comic book scene of a man with knives for feet, ripping apart an opponent he was fighting. Blood sprayed in the air.

Three pairs of spit-polished combat boots sat by the bedside. A tape, *The Faces of Death*, sat on the VCR, attached to a spotless television.

Ron reached for the door to the closet.

"No," his mother said firmly. "Not there. He don't let us go in there. We're never supposed to do that!"

The double door too was locked but with one yank Ron ripped the panels open, nearly wrenching them off the hinges.

Gruesome toys, monsters and vampires, characters from horror films fell out. Rubber mock-ups of severed limbs, taxidermied animals, a snake's skeleton, Freddy Krueger posters.

And in the center of the closet floor was the main attraction: an altar dedicated to Gwen Ashberry.

Ron cried out in horror as he dropped to his knees, staring at the frightening tableau. Several photographs of Gwen were pinned to the wall. Harle must have taken them on the days when she walked home from school by herself. In two of the snapshots she was strolling obliviously along the sidewalk. In the third she was turning and smiling off into the distance. And in the fourth—the one that struck him like a fist—she was bending down to tie her shoe, her short skirt hiked high on her trim legs. This was the photo in the center of the shrine.

She loves me, I love her she loves me I love she loves I love she loves she loves she loves shelovesshelovesshelovessssss . . .

On the floor, between two candles, what looked like a white flower, sprouting from a dime-store coffee mug, printed with the name Gwen on it. Ron touched the flower. It was cloth . . . but what exactly? He almost didn't have the courage to lift it from the

cup, and when he finally did pull the girl's underpants from the mug all he could do was give a deep moan and clutch the frail garment to his chest. He remembered Doris commenting several months ago that she'd found the outer door to the laundry room open. So, he'd been in the house!

In his fury Ron ripped down the picture of Gwen bending over. Then the others. Shredded them beneath his strong fingers.

"Please, don't do that! No, no!" Harle's mother cried.

"Really, mister!"

"Harle'll be mad. I can't stand it when he gets mad at us."

Ron rose to his feet, flung the cup into a Nazi flag, where it shattered. He pushed past the cowering Ebberses, flung open the front door, and strode out into the street.

"Where are you?" he cried. "Where? You son of a bitch!"

The peaceful dusk in Locust Grove had tipped into peaceful night. Ron saw nothing but faint houselights; he heard nothing but his own voice, dulled by the mist, returning to him from a dozen distant places.

Ron leapt into his car and left long black worms of skid marks as he knocked over garbage cans, streaking into the street.

Three hours later, he returned home.

The bright security lights were on, one of them trained directly at the juniper bush.

"Where've you been?" Doris demanded. "I've called everybody I could think of, trying to find you."

"Driving around, looking for him. Is everything okay?" he asked.

"I thought I heard somebody in the workshed about an hour ago, rummaging around."

"And?"

"I called the police and they came by. Didn't find anything. Might've been a raccoon. The window was open. But the door was locked."

"Gwen?"

"She's upstairs asleep. Did you find him?"

"No, no trace. At least I hope I put the fear of God into him so we'll have a few days' peace." He looked around the house. "Let's make sure everything's locked up anyway."

Ron walked to the front door and opened it, stepping back in shock at the sight of the huge dark form filling the doorway. Gasping, he instinctively drew back his fist.

"Whoa, there, buddy, take it easy."

Sheriff Hanlon stepped forward into the hallway light.

Ron closed his eyes in relief. "You scared me."

"I'll ditto that. Mind if I come in?"

"It's about time you fellows got here," Ron snapped. The sheriff entered, nodding to Doris, who ushered him into the living room. He declined coffee.

Husband and wife looked at the sheriff, a big man in a tan uniform. He sat on the couch and said simply, "Harle Ebbers was found dead about a half-hour ago. He was hit by a train on the LIRR tracks."

Doris gasped. The sheriff nodded grimly. Ron didn't even try to keep the smile off his face. "Praise Him from whom all blessings flow."

The sheriff kept his face emotionless. He looked back to his notebook. "Where've you been for the past three hours, Ron? Since you left the Ebbers house?"

"You went there?" Doris asked.

Ron knitted his fingers together then decided it made him look guilty and unlinked them. "Driving around," he answered. "Looking for Harle. Somebody had to. You weren't."

"And you found him," the sheriff said.

"No, I didn't find him."

"Yessir. Well, somebody sure did. Ron, we've got reports of you threatening that boy tonight. The Clarkes and the Phillipses heard some screaming and looked out. They heard you saying that you didn't care if you got caught, or even executed, you wanted to kill him. And then you took off chasing him down Maple."

"Well, I —"

"And then we got reports that you caused a disturbance at the Ebbers place and fled." He read from his notebook. "'In a very agitated frame of mind.'"

"'Agitated frame of mind.' Of course I was agitated. He had a pair of my daughter's underwear in this goddamn altar in his closet."

Doris's hand rose to her mouth.

"And I found some pictures of her he'd taken on the way home from school."

"What were you doing at the Ebbers house? Did you break in?"

"No, they let me in."

"Okay, go on."

"There's nothing to go on about. I wanted to talk to him. He wasn't there. So I left."

"And then?"

"I drove around, looking for him. I didn't find him. I came home. Look, Sheriff, I said I'd kill him. Sure. I'll admit it. And if he was running from me and got hit when he was crossing the tracks I'm sorry. If that's, I don't know, negligent homicide, or something, then arrest me for it."

The sheriff's broad face cracked a faint smile. "Negligent homicide. Let me ask you, you read about that somewhere? Hear it on Court TV?"

"What do you mean?"

"Just that it sounded a little rehearsed. Like maybe you'd thought it up before. You threw it at me pretty quick just then."

"Look, don't blame me if he got hit by a train. What the hell're you smiling at?"

"You're good is what I'm smiling at. I think you know that boy was dead before the train came along."

Doris was frowning. Her head swiveled toward her husband.

The sheriff continued. "Somebody crushed his skull with a blunt object—that was the cause of death—and dragged him a few feet to the roadbed. Left him on the tracks. The killer was hoping him getting hit by a train'd cover up the evidence of the blows. But the train wheel only hit his neck. The head was intact enough so the medical examiner could be sure about the cause of death."

"Well," Ron said.

"Do you own an Arnold Palmer model forty-seven golf club? A driving wood?"

A long pause.

"I don't know."

"Do you golf?"

"Yes."

"Do you own golf clubs?"

"I've been buying golf clubs all my life."

"I ask 'cause that was the murder weapon. I'm thinking you beat him to death, left him on the tracks, and threw the club in Hammond Lake. Only you missed and it ended up in the marsh beside the lake, sticking straight up. Took the county troopers all of five minutes to find it."

Doris turned to the sheriff. "No, it wasn't him! Somebody broke into our shed tonight and must've stolen a club. Ron keeps a lot of

his old ones there. He must've stolen one. I can prove it—I called your office about it.”

“I know that, Mrs. Ashberry. But you said nothing was missing.”

“I didn't check the clubs. I didn't think to.”

Ron swallowed. “You think I'd be stupid enough to kill that boy after I called the police and after I threatened him in front of witnesses?”

The sheriff said, “People do stupid things when they're upset. And they sometimes do some pretty smart things when they're pretending they're upset.”

“Oh, come on, Sheriff. With my own golf club?”

“Which you were planning to send to the bottom of fifty feet of water and another five of mud. By the way, whether it's yours or not, that club's got your fingerprints all over it.”

“How did you get my prints?” Ron demanded.

“The Ebbers house. The boy's closet door and a coffee cup you smashed up. Now, Ron, I want to ask you a few more questions.”

He looked out the kitchen window. He happened to catch sight of the juniper bush. He said, “I don't think I want to say anything more.”

“That's your right.”

“And I want to see a lawyer.”

“That's your right too, sir. If you could hold out your hands for me, please. We're gonna slip these cuffs on and then take a little ride.”

Ron Ashberry entered the Montauk Men's Correctional Facility as an instant hero. Having avenged his daughter the way he had.

And the day that Gwen gave that interview on Channel 9 the whole wing was in the TV room watching. Ron sat glumly in the back row and listened to her talk with the woman reporter.

“Here was this creep who'd stolen my underwear and'd taken pictures of me on my way home from school and in my swimsuit and everything. I mean, he was, like, a real stalker . . . and the police didn't do anything about it. It was my father who saved me. I'm, like, I'm totally proud of him.”

Ron Ashberry heard this and thought just what he'd thought a thousand times since that night in April: I'm glad you're proud of me, baby. Except, except, except . . . I didn't do it. I didn't kill Harle Ebbers.

Just after he'd been arrested, the defense lawyer had suggested that maybe Doris was the killer, though Ron knew she wouldn't have let him take the blame. Besides, friends and neighbors confirmed that she'd been on the phone with them, asking about Ron's whereabouts, at the time of the boy's death. Phone records bore this out too.

Then there was Harle's father. Ron remembered what the man had told him earlier that evening. But Ron's tearing out of the driveway caused such a stir in the Ebberts' neighborhood that several snooping neighbors kept an eye on the house for the rest of the evening and could testify that neither husband nor wife had left the bungalow all night.

Ron had even proposed the theory that the boy had killed himself. He knew Ron was out to get him and, in his psychotic frame of mind, Harle wanted to retaliate, get back at the Ashberry family. He'd stolen the golf club and wandered to the train track, where he'd beaten himself silly, flung the club toward the lake, and crawled onto the tracks to die. His defense lawyer gave it a shot, but the D.A. and police actually laughed at that one.

And then in a flash, Ron had figured it out.

The brother of the girl in Connecticut! The girl who'd been the previous victim. Ron envisioned the scenario: The young man had come to Locust Grove and had stalked the stalker, seeking revenge both for his sister and for the beating he himself had taken. The brother—afraid that Harle was about to be sent back to the safety of the hospital—decided to act fast and had broken into the nearest workshed he could find to get a weapon, never knowing that Ron had threatened Harle earlier that evening and that he'd become the prime suspect.

The D.A. hadn't listened to that theory either and went forward with the case.

Everyone recommended that Ron take a plea, which he finally did, exhausted with protesting his innocence. There was no trial; the judge accepted the plea and sentenced him to twenty years. He'd be eligible for parole in seven. His secret hope was that the boy in Connecticut would have a change of heart and confess. But until that day Ron Ashberry would be a guest of the people of the state of New York.

Sitting in the TV room, staring at Gwen on the screen, absently playing with the zipper of his orange jumpsuit, Ron was vaguely aware of a nagging thought. What was it?

Something that Gwen had just said to the interviewer.

Wait . . .

What pictures of her in her swimsuit?

He sat up.

Ron hadn't found any photos of her in a bathing suit in Harle's closet. And there hadn't been any introduced at trial, since there'd been no trial. He'd never heard about any swimsuit pictures. If there were any, how had Gwen known about them?

A terrible thought came to him, so terrible that it was laughable. Though he didn't laugh; he was compelled to consider it—and the other thoughts that sprang up like ugly crabgrass around it: that the only person who'd ever heard Harle threaten Gwen was Gwen herself. That nobody'd ever heard Harle's side of the situation—no one except the psychiatrist in Garden City and, come to think of it, he'd let the boy out. That all the young man had ever said to Ron was that he loved Gwen and she loved him—nothing worse than what any young man with a crush might say.

Ron's thoughts, racing: They'd just been *accepting* Gwen's story about Harle's approaching her on the way home from school eight months ago.

And had been assuming all along that he'd pursued Gwen, that she hadn't encouraged him.

And her underpants . . . ?

Could *she* have given him the panties herself?

Suddenly enraged, Ron leapt to his feet; his chair flew backwards with a loud slam. A guard ambled over and motioned for Ron to pick it up.

As he did, Ron's thoughts raged. Could it actually have happened—what he was now thinking? Was it possible?

Had she been . . . flirting with that psycho all along?

Had she actually posed for him, given him a pair of the underwear?

Why, that little slut!

He'd take her over his knee! He'd ground her so fast . . . She always behaved when he spanked her, and the harder he whipped her the quicker she toed the line. He'd call Doris, insist she take the Ping-Pong paddle to the girl. He'd—

"Yo, Ashberry," the guard grumbled, looking at Ron's purple face as it glared up at the screen. "You can't cool it off, git it on outa here."

Ron slowly turned to him.

And he did cool off. Inhaling deep breaths, he realized he was just being paranoid. Gwen was pure. She was innocence itself. Besides, he told himself, be logical. What possible reason would she have to flirt with someone like Harle Ebbers, to encourage him? Ron had raised her properly. Taught her the right values. *Family* values. She was exactly his vision of what a young woman ought to be.

But thinking of his daughter left him feeling empty, without the heart to continue watching the interview. Ron turned away from the TV and shuffled to the rec room to be by himself.

And so he didn't hear the end of the interview, during which the reporter asked Gwen what she was going to do now. She answered, with a girlish giggle, that she was about to leave for a week in Washington with her teacher and some classmates, a trip she'd been looking forward to for months. Was she going with her boyfriend? the reporter asked. She didn't have one, the girl said coyly. Not yet. But she sure was in the market.

Then the reporter asked about plans after high school. Was she going to college?

No, Gwen didn't believe college was for her. She wanted to do something fun, something that involved travel. She thought she might try her hand at a sport. Golf probably. Over the past several years her father had spent countless hours forcing her to practice her strokes.

"He always said I should learn a proper sport," she explained. "He was quite a taskmaster. But one thing I'll say—I've got a great swing."

"I know it's been hard for you, but I'm sure you're relieved to have that monster out of your life," the reporter offered.

Gwen gave a sudden, curious laugh and turned to the camera as she said, "You have no idea."

The interview ended and the inmates applauded, hooting their congratulations to Ron in the other room; one of theirs was, for a little while at least, a celebrity. But they soon stopped talking about the interview. Baltimore was playing Chicago tonight; money started to change hands and the point spread became the hot subject. Someone called into the rec room to see if Ron wanted to place a bet. But he didn't hear them call his name, or ignored them if he had, and continued to slouch listlessly in a yellow Fiberglas chair, absently flipping through the pages of a three-week-old *People* magazine. ●

A TOUGH CASE TO FIGURE

by Dick Lochte

The big man seated across the desk from me obviously had experienced trouble first-hand. He was wearing a plaster on his forehead the size of a credit card. His left eye was swollen and his mouth had a puffy, worked-over look.

He was taking the long way around to tell me how it all happened. "... then the woman—she said her name was Alice—she grabbed my hand and led me out of the place."

"Place got a name?" I asked.

"Laroque's House of Heaven," he said. "Sort of a bar in the French Quarter. But I hadn't had very much to drink."

I cocked a sceptical eyebrow at him.

"No, really," he said, defensively. "Two scotches, tops. I . . . I'm not a drinking man. Really."

"Nobody who visits New Orleans is a drinking man, Mr. Denham," I told him. "Or a man who plays around. It's something in the air."

His frown told me he didn't like my attitude. "I came for help, not a discussion of my morals."

I didn't reply, just stared at him, waiting for him to get around to the help part. He'd been in my office for nearly fifteen minutes and he'd given up very little. His name was Raymond Edgar Denham, of the Virginia Denhams. He was staying at the home of a

Twenty-three years ago, *EQMM* published Dick Lochte's first mystery fiction, a short story entitled "Medford and Son."

Since then, he has established two continuing series of novels, one featuring L.A. detective Leo Bloodworth and the other New Orleans P.I. Terry Manion.

The following story brings together themes and characters from Mr. Lochte's novels.

Readers who'd like more should see *The Neon Smile* (S&S). †

local master of medicine named LeBlanc, who had hired my agency a few months back to retrieve his wandering daughter. We, my partner Joe Mallory and I, found her in Gulfport, Mississippi, living in a condo with a young guy named Esteban. Since they had gone to the effort of legalizing their union, and since she was of age, that was that for the LeBlanc case. Doc LeBlanc may not have liked the outcome, but we'd done our work quickly and with discretion. Which I assumed was what impressed him enough to send more business our way.

Denham pulled back his sleeve and glanced nervously at a gold watch on his wrist.

"Keeping you from something, Mr. Denham?" I asked.

"Sorry," he snapped, nervously. "I'm anxious to get back to the LeBlanc house. Give my bruises a rest."

"Sure," I said. "So you were leaving the bar with a lady named Alice..."

"Right. We left the bar. A block away, three guys wearing stocking masks pushed us into an alley. They wanted my money. When I didn't give it to them fast enough, they started hitting me."

"What about Alice?"

He made a helpless gesture with his hands. "I think she got away. I don't know for sure. I was pretty busy."

"Even with three of 'em, they were taking a chance," I said, surveying his size and shape.

"I may have gotten a punch in."

I pointed to his scraped and raw knuckles. "Maybe more than one?"

"I did what I could. But it wasn't enough. They beat the hell out of me. Then they snatched my wallet and took off. I crawled out of the alley and somehow made it back to the car I'd borrowed from Paul LeBlanc. Paul patched me up himself."

"The best healing hands in the business," I said. "I suppose you reported the mugging to the cops?"

He hesitated, then said, "What's the point? They won't spend much time on a simple French Quarter mugging."

"And you probably wouldn't want to go on record about your hitting the bars with little Alice."

"No. I wouldn't," he said.

"Married man?" I asked, my eyes dropping to the naked fingers of his battered left hand.

"Not married. Engaged. I don't want to make a big thing of this. I understood you were discreet."

"'Discretion' is our byword," I told him. "Won't the fiancée be curious about the bruises?"

"I'll be traveling for the next three weeks. Let's see how I look then."

"Well, Mr. Denham, what exactly do you want?" I asked. "Revenge? Your money back? What?"

"I'm not interested in revenge or the money. It was only a couple hundred dollars. I've canceled the credit cards. But there were other things, credentials, that I'd like to recover. What are my chances?"

I told him I thought we might just turn up something. Then we discussed my rates and cut a deal.

As soon as he'd hobbled out of the office, I rattled Mallory's cage next door and sent him to keep an eye on Denham. Guys who get mugged in the Quarter don't usually hold on to their gold watches. Maybe he'd been lucky and maybe something else was going on.

I got out the phone book and dialed Laroque's House of Heaven. Alice was such a regular that even the day barkeep knew her. Alice Russo. Apartment on Camp Street in the low-rent district.

She was tall, large-boned, but a little high-strung. Not bad, if you don't mind the boyish look, which I don't. She seemed afraid of me, which made the job easier. After we'd had our little chat, I put in a call to Denham and set up another meeting.

Mallory was in his car, parked down the street from the LeBlanc home in the Garden District. "Our man come straight here from the office?" I asked him.

Mallory nodded, then scowled at me. "You look worried. Something wrong?" he asked.

"I don't know," I told him. "It's a tough case to figure. Let's go see if we can simple it up a little."

Mallory patted the gun holstered under his jacket. It seemed to give him confidence.

Dr. Paul LeBlanc let us in. He was a little olive-skinned guy with a thin moustache who didn't look like he'd know beans about gray matter. But the word was, if something went wrong up there, he was the knife man you wanted to dig in and set it right. He said Denham was waiting for us in the solarium. The last time I'd seen LeBlanc, when I'd told him about his daughter getting hitched to her Latino lover, there'd been nothing shy about him. But just then, he wasn't looking me in the eye.

I put on the brakes and slapped my forehead. "I'm a jackass," I told him. "Is it four o'clock yet?"

"Nearly that," the doctor said.

"Aww. The time got away from me. We're supposed to be clear across town right now."

"But, I thought—" Doc LeBlanc began.

"We'll be back in an hour," I told him, giving Mallory the "out of here" sign with my thumb.

As we started for the door, Denham joined the party from the solarium. "You're not going?" he asked. He draped a heavy arm over my shoulders. It was a friendly enough gesture.

"Mr. Mallory and I have something urgent to attend to," I said. "We'll be back. . . ."

"As long as you're here," Denham said, steering me toward the solarium, "why not take a minute and get our business settled?"

The little doc excused himself and left us. Mallory, even more confused than usual, trailed Denham and me into the solarium. The afternoon sun was still bright and the glass room was warm. We sat on wicker chairs beside a row of green and blue and yellow flowers, me facing Denham and Mallory. Mallory's eyebrows were raised so high they were almost touching his toupee.

"You said on the phone you'd made progress," Denham told me. "You found my wallet?"

"No. But I found Alice."

"Oh." He sounded disappointed. "Is she all right?"

"She looked fine."

"Was she in it with them? Did she set me up?"

The guy seemed so damned sincere, and his bruises were the real thing. I decided I was getting spooked over nothing. "No. She's a victim like you. And . . . she's got this problem."

"Problem?"

"The muggers have threatened her," I said.

"I don't understand."

We'd come to the trickiest part. Alice had been a little vague about what happened after the mugging. "When they took care of you," I said, "they slapped her around a little and scared the hell out of her."

"The bastards," Denham snapped. "Does she know who they are?"

"No. But they know her and they know where she lives. And she's afraid."

"The poor kid," Denham said, obviously concerned.

"Yeah. Well, the poor kid is about to go to the cops for protection."

Denham stared at me blankly. Not getting it. I had to spell it out for him. "She's gonna go to the cops, Mr. Denham. That means the cops will want to talk with you. And they'll want to know why you didn't go to them earlier. And maybe the *Times-Picayune* stringer who hangs around the NOPD will get interested and you'll wind up with a lot of free newspaper publicity you don't want."

"I can't have that happen," he said.

"Then it may cost you a little money."

"Money? For what?" Denham asked.

"Alice says she either goes to the law or she splits from New Orleans," I told him. "Only she doesn't have the cash for a trip."

"How much does she need?"

"She says two thousand should get her to relatives in Atlanta. My suggestion is you use cash."

"Two thousand dollars?" Denham squealed. I shrugged and waited for him to mull it over.

"You think I should pay her?" he asked.

"Either that, or she has to go to the cops, dragging you along."

"Can't you find the men and put them away?" He sounded really desperate.

"Putting 'em away will drag you into it, too," I said. "It's much cleaner if she clears out."

"Hell," he said. "I suppose I can get the cash. Then what? Do I take it to her?"

"Don't worry about that," I told him. "We can handle that part of it."

"I bet you can," he said, grinning suddenly.

The grin sent a chill up my spine. I looked at Mallory. His hand was edging toward his right lapel.

"What if I told you," the big guy said, "that my name isn't Denham and I don't come from Virginia and my face and hands look like this because I ran into a couple of smart guys who were running the badger game in L.A.? As bad as I look, they look worse. And they're being treated by prison doctors."

"You're not the law," I said. "What's your game?"

"My name's Bloodworth. I'm a P.I. from Los Angeles. The Mansion Detective Agency sent for me because I'm not known here. We wrote the scenario to fit my bruises and contusions."

The room was too hot. I could feel the sweat dripping down the

back of my neck. Bloodworth was facing me. To his right, Mallory waited for some sign.

"The LeBlancs hired Manion, huh?" I asked.

"Just as soon as they found out you'd extorted money from Julio Esteban to keep quiet until after he'd married their daughter."

"That's crap," I said. "That never happened."

"It would have been your word against Esteban's. Which is why Manion and I had to stage this dog and pony show."

"It's entrapment."

"No entrapment," the big guy said. "We'll even give your lawyer a copy of the transcript of our conversation, let him go over every line."

I scowled at him. "A couple of bucks. I'll be out in a year. Six months."

"That's all we were going for," Bloodworth said. "In spite of yourself, you did the LeBlancs and the Estebans a good turn. They're all one big family now. United in the desire to teach you a lesson. Just a little lesson."

"But you had to get rough with Alice. She's a friend of mine. And you'll pay for that with a few more years. Both you and your monkey."

It was definitely time to give Mallory the sign and he dragged his gun clear of his coat. With surprising speed, Bloodworth shifted his body and hit Mallory in the face, busting his nose and sending him and his chair over backwards.

Then the big man was on his feet, plucking Mallory's gun from the floor and slipping it into his pocket.

He moved toward me and I raised my hands, showing they were empty. Flat on the deck, Mallory moaned, more unconscious than not.

"I ought to dust you, too," Bloodworth said, "for slapping Alice around."

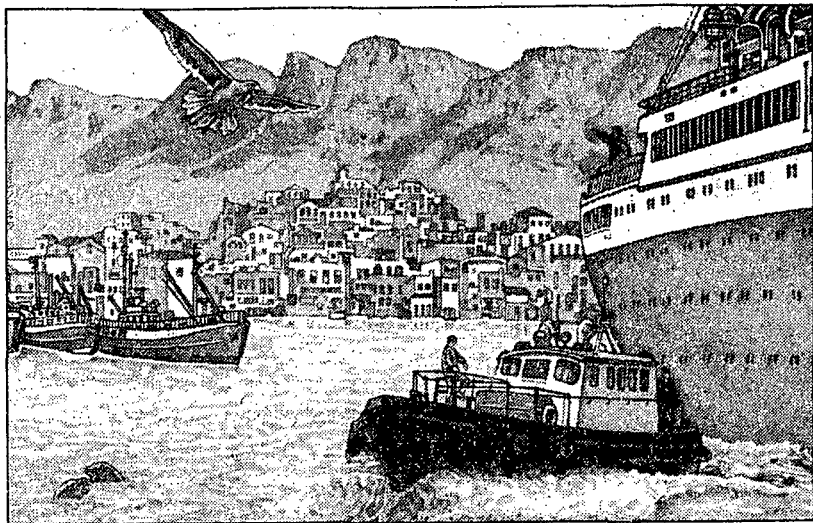
"Tell her I enjoyed it," I said.

Dr. LeBlanc came to the door of the solarium to announce that the police were on their way. With him was a thin guy with glasses. I'd seen him around. Manion. "Good work, Leo," he said to Bloodworth.

"Good work? Wearing that gold watch was bush league," I told Bloodworth, trying to make his victory a little less sweet.

"It was dumb," he admitted. "We were lucky that greed made you dumber."

After that, I waited for the cops in silence. ●



ACH, DIE SEEMANN IST PERDU

by Frances Joyce

“W

hat have I got to tell you? I've killed someone! . . . You don't even raise an eyebrow, Doctor . . . Did you hear what I said? I'm a murderer . . . When I was naughty as a child my father used to say to me I was born to be hanged. Isn't that strange? He was right! He was right!

“It was on Tuesday. I wish I could rewind time and live Tuesday over again. Haven't you ever wished that, Dr. Goodsink? You do something terrible and it stays done forever. You ought to be able to have a second chance, you really ought to. It isn't fair . . .

“I was terribly depressed on Tuesday. The pills haven't helped, you know . . . Pills never seem to help me . . . I got into my car and

drove. Just drove, anywhere. Sometimes that helps. I found myself driving into the docks. I parked the car and walked along the quay a bit. I was feeling even worse. The harbour's such a sad place! Everything's so transient. Moving on, moving on . . . The cargo, the people, the railway lines, the ships . . . all moving on . . .

"I noticed an ugly brute of a ship, all metal bulk and winches and cranes . . . There were waterspiders of light dancing over the ship's sides and over the name: It was a Russian ship because the letters were printed in Cyrillic.

"There were two workmen standing on the quay fooling around with a paintbrush tied to the end of a long rod. They were trying to paint the ship's sides a grim grey colour. But they weren't managing to brush the paint on. They kept hauling the rod in and bickering over it like Laurel and Hardy.

"I stood looking up at the ship, wishing I could sail away from myself. Someone said 'Good afternoon' in a foreign accent. It was morning, not yet ten o'clock.

"There was a man leaning over the railings at the top of the gangplank. He wasn't bad looking, but old enough to be my father. We started talking. Not that it was much of a conversation, you understand. He had hardly any English. But he could make me understand he was off duty. He said, 'Cape Town is beautiful city.' I thought, Why not show him round a bit? He seemed nice . . .

"So I drove him round the Peninsula, took him to Cape Point to see the two oceans meet, drove him to Stellenbosch. We had a late lunch at a wine farm, walked around and picked some grapes for him to take back . . . We had a wonderful time! It seemed silly to call it a day . . . so we arranged to meet again later in the evening. I thought maybe my husband could join us, but the sailor didn't seem enthusiastic about the idea so, like a fool, I agreed to meet him alone again . . .

Pseudonymous author Frances Joyce hails from South Africa, where her poetry has appeared in many magazines. Although she is a relative newcomer to the world of short fiction, she contributed an excellent first mystery story to *EQMM* in Mid-December 1994 ("The Wheel"). Her new tale is set in Cape Town, a city she writes about with affection and verve. †

"Do you know that nightspot called Tommy's Tavern and Disco? It's in that dubious crossroads area where the city shades into the docks and isolated commercial buildings before it becomes residential. Tommy's is in a building that looks like a prison, with barred windows. The door overhang is painted with the face of a comic-strip blonde.

"Parking's a problem there. But I ran the car into the cobbled alley behind the tavern, where they keep the dustbins.

"When I switched off the ignition he grabbed me. Tried to kiss me, you know. Well, I . . . he smelt! Not *bad*, but of aftershave. Funny, my father used to use that brand, it always nauseated me.

"I struggled to pull away from him. I . . . um . . . I think I might have hit him. The buildings on either side of me seemed to steep together to blot out the narrow strip of sky. They were covered with long, thick pipes and there was a dirty metal stairway zigzagging up one of them. I was suffocating and he wouldn't let me go! He just wouldn't . . .

"I have a gun . . . to keep with me when my husband's traveling and I'm alone, nights. I had it in my bag. Somehow it found its way into my hand. I pressed the muzzle into his side and pulled the trigger! Twice! Three times!

"He groaned and fell sideways. He was dying . . .

"I ripped open the passenger door. He was propped against the door and he fell out. I kicked his legs out after him. I heard broken beer-bottle glass crunch beneath his weight. Then I slammed the door and was reversing with squealing tires. I careered off before anyone was able to come out and investigate the noise. So no one knows it was me who killed him. Except you, now. But you're like a priest, aren't you, Doctor? You keep professional secrecy. But his shipmates, they must have described me to the police . . . Perhaps one of them even noticed my numberplate, what do you think? Every time I hear a car drive up our road my knees tremble and I collapse . . . I think it's the police come to arrest me. Do they still execute women who have killed? What's going to happen to my family? my children?

"Doctor, please help me . . . help me! Help me!"

I sat terrified in my typist's chair. The tape was unwinding to the sounds of desperate sobbing, which were cut short with a click where Raffael Goodsink's finger had depressed the switch.

I shucked off the headpiece as if it were last season's hat and me

at the Durban July Handicap with a Sunday-paper photographer just hove into view.

This is Mrs. Gabrielli? I asked myself. This is the doll with whom I have exchanged recipes for quiche and carrot cake when she came for her appointment with Raffael? And all the time I am eyeball to eyeball with a homicidal maniac?!

This barmy baby is not coming nowhere near me again, no way, hey!

I can do you a bit of depression, yes. I can cope with a bit of kleptomania. I can talk hysteria just like my mother talks hysterectomies. But psychosis? No, sis! Find someone else. Who knows, she may be a serial murderer who's just discovering her *métier* and looking around for more material. Sheesh!

I stood up, opened the French windows, and stepped out onto the tiny metal-railed balcony for a breath of calming fresh air.

Raffael's rooms are on the first floor of the Empire Hotel, on the side that looks out on the West Pier, but I was too distracted to take in the view, what with my flesh crawling, my skin creeping, my hair standing on end, and my wind up, you should pardon the expression.

Without registering the details, my eyes passed over the familiar scene:

Directly below me the brilliantly ballooning umbrellas of a sidewalk resaurant, the quay where crowds of tourists ambled, the berthed ships stationary in waters in which seals frolicked. The gigantic crane over the dry docks where a vessel was being scoured, and beyond that the vast quarry that was being blasted out of the rock for a new marina, at the bottom of which miniature mechanical dinosaurs lumbered. The two abandoned Victorian villas at the edge of the quarry, their corrugated-iron-roofed verandahs crumbling and their brick walls scurfed with curling whitewash and spray-painted graffiti. A parked patrol car, the towering skyscrapers of the foreshore, the gigantic bulk of the flat-topped mountain that trivialised the small white houses on its flanks. I turned back inside and walked over to the adjoining room which Raffael uses for his consultations.

My boss was slouched at a table near the French windows, making a watercolour replica of a Xhoi cave painting he'd photographed. This is what he does for fun on his weekends, scrambles around the bush getting sand in his boots and bark down his back when he could be at home watching it all on TV. Rather him than me.

I looked at the slob. I think I'd drop down dead if I had to go anywhere with him in public, even if it was only Cipton Beach in a bathing costume.

There was enough paint on his face to qualify him for a square metre of wall at the National Gallery. His hair looked like a kelp forest the current had got at. It needed a good cut and style—I could have recommended a hairdresser who is an *Absolute Genius*, but Mr. Know-All wouldn't be interested. As for his clothes—I swear I've seen better clothes in the Cape Flats Distress Fund bag. Baggy shorts that were originally designed for Babar the Elephant, a T-shirt torn along the shoulder as if it was—very understandably—in mourning for itself, and a pair of tacky takkies. With no socks!

What was a nice girl like me, in my white tailored suit, my silk blouse, and my gold chain, earrings, and watch, doing with a clown like this in his hand-me-downs.

Only he wasn't a clown but a world-renowned psychiatrist. Me, I wouldn't turn my psyche over to someone in factory rejects, but I seemed to be a minority opinion. Word of mouth said he was wonderful and people fought to lay their phobias at his feet.

Raffael dropped his brush in the saucer of his teacup and I batted disapproving eyelashes as paint splattered over the porcelain. He leaned back in his chair and contemplated me serenely over his granny specs.

"Raffael, you buzzed the Flying Squad yet?"

I mean, this dozy doll was not going to spoil my summer vac at Plett. If I didn't show, Shirley and Sidney and the crowd would go into deep mourning. Ivrilton might even make a pyre of his surf-board and throw himself on it.

You'd think that any man who had the slightest consideration for a girl's sensitive feelings would rush to reassure her, wouldn't you?

Not my boss. Not a peep out of him. He just tilts his chair a little further back and gazes at me like an adult looks at a child whose words have only the sketchiest relation to reality but who looks cute and is mildly amusing. He reached out for a circular from the morning's post and idly started folding it up.

I drew a deep breath, my chest swelled, and my Victoria's Secret lingerie felt the strain.

Mind you, I know he never talks much. It's his professional manner to encourage his patients to spill the beans. Me, I believe in making waves, airwaves. After all, we weren't given a tongue

just so's we could experience smoked salmon and Black Forest cake, though I have heard that point of view advanced.

"I'm speaking a foreign language?" I asked. "You—police—*Brrring, Brrring!*—Capish?"

The expression in Raffael's eyes changed to one of long-suffering.

"Vesper Green, Vesper Green, Prettiest Girl I've Ever Seen, go and get on with your work; there's a good girl. And trust me to do what's right for Mrs. Gabrielli."

I swung round on a very high heel and flounced back to the reception room, though slightly mollified by half his response.

Something came floating over my head after me, swooping like a swallow and nose-diving into a chair.

A paper aeroplane.

"And book me into this Paris conference. The details are on the circular."

There are some people who swear psychiatrists are loopier than their patients. Tell me about it!

One day when he was feeling unusually talkative Raffael told me Freud once threw his slipper at a statuette of Venus in his home and smashed it. At the same time he recited some verse:

"Ach! Die Venus ist perdü—
Klickeradoms!—von Medici!"

Someone in his home had been ill and then recovered and this was his way of sacrificing to the gods in gratitude.

Now I ask you, is that sane?

I got on with my work.

I typed the Gabrielli tape, entering it into the computer, and it didn't sound any better the second time around. I wondered if I should take out life insurance.

I booked Raffael into the conference and reserved his flight. I answered the phone, made appointments, made a few calls of my own—a girl has to have some social life—produced some invoices and receipts, took checks to the bank, and then went for lunch.

I stepped out of the hotel onto the pierhead of the waterfront.

It was one of those great summer days that the city dishes out in abundance and that just make you want to go out and buy a new outfit.

The sun was beaming out of an eyeshadow-blue sky. The sea was graciously waving at everyone, her diamond bracelets flashing. Barges decorated with bunting and packed with families and

kids ferried the harbour. Tourists rubbernecked at curio shops and Capetonians idled at open-air restaurants. There were so many people thronging the shops you'd think they were giving it away free. Don't you believe it! The shopkeepers reminded me of some poem I learnt in elocution class in junior school. They looked like crocodiles welcoming in the little fishes with gently smiling jaws. The seagulls were screaming insults at each other in guttural and cackling squawks like streetwise strollers and the seals in the water were lolling around, languidly applauding the whole show with indolent flippers.

I collected my friend Amina from the T-shirt shop where she works—she gets a discount on her purchases and you should see her wardrobe!—and we went to get a pizza slice and a Diet Coke. What it cost me to hold my tongue with Amina about Mrs. Gabrielli will never be known. But I was a martyr to medical discretion and suffered in silence. I dropped some hints about leaving her my favourite gold charm bracelet in my will and that was all the relief my feelings had.

On the way we bumped into Mr. Baumann, who works in the Good Hope Bank. His daughter had just had her first baby and made him a grandfather. To hear him talk, her husband, nature, and a DNA spiral had nothing to do with it. She practically invented and patented the process all on her own.

We admired the photographs. It was the kind of baby advertising men drool over, with a chubby smile that turned up like a sales graph.

I felt kind of hollow inside. Must have been a desire either for pizza or maternity. Mind you, I have my priorities right. It's matrimony first for this doll: a white wedding, guests in their hundreds, the best caterers, a honeymoon at Sun City, the works. I already have a prospective bridegroom lined up. Selwyn is a doctor at Groote Schuur Hospital and the man is mine, I swear, even if I have to fracture a femur outside his flat to get him.

At the pizzeria, Den "Freckles" Cameron and Sprinter Khumalo, who run a donut shack, joined us at our table. Sprinter is in training for the Olympics and both of them want the Games to be held in Cape Town. They spent the whole lunch arguing about how to join up donut rings to make the Olympic symbol. Amina was interested, but in my opinion a girl can get up just so much enthusiasm about that subject before it begins to pall. When I felt my eyes beginning to glaze over like their donuts I started to look around me.

I caught sight of Face de Wet a few metres away, talking to a couple who were resting on a corner seat. He'd borrowed their newspaper and was paging through it. He must have felt my gaze, for he looked up and waved a salute.

Face is one of the waterfront's security officers. They wear white naval uniforms with shoulder epaulets.

I sometimes chaff the time of day with Face, who would have a TV idol profile if his jaw hadn't got broken in a punch-up way back when. His profile's probably why he got his nickname. One day I must ask Raffael what it is about a uniform that gets a girl's attention. It packages a man so attractively! I suppose medieval maidens felt the same about knights in their shining armour.

At five till two Amina and I strolled back to work.

That afternoon there was a new patient to see Raffael. As I ushered him out onto the landing afterwards I saw Face again. He was leaning against the railings of the central landing well and talking to the hotel's security officer. When he saw me he made a few *Ciao-see-you-around* sounds to his pal and strolled over to my reception room for a chat.

After a bit of howzit and chitchat of this and that he said something that really gave me a lift. I felt like Atalanta, or whoever it was, when Hercules took the world off her shoulders.

"I was telling Jack—I heard it on the grapevine the police have traced the person who did that murder at Tommy's Tavern just a few streets away from here."

"Thank you, heaven," I gasped, "and I promise I'll give to charity that red dress I've only worn twice but it doesn't suit me."

Now does Face hitch his chair a little closer and murmur, "Vesper, your reaction intrigues me mightily. Could it be that this news has a profound meaning in your life?" Does he heck. That's the trouble with men—well, one of the troubles—and don't get me started on that subject! Too wrapped up in their own little concerns.

"They've arrested him and he's made a confession."

Now I realise that despite women's lib people still use the pronoun "he" to indicate persons of both genders but this seemed to be going a bit far.

"Her," I corrected. "She's."

"Hey?"

"Mrs. Gabrielli. They've arrested her and she's confessed."

Face is now looking at me like I'm a foreign movie without subtitles.

"You trying to have me on? The bloke they've thrown in the tronk's called Peterson. Snatch thief with a long-playing record. Tracks entitled 'No Schooling,' 'Reformatory,' 'Street Gang,' 'Tronk.' The needle's been stuck in the last two tracks for years now. But what he's done with this latest, he's bumped the head off onto the last track of Side Two entitled 'Swan Song.' He'll be condemned to death."

"Condemned," I corrected absently.

"Sorry, sometimes my English isn't so good."

Picture my situation, dear friends. I now not only have one, but *two* confessed murderers on my books. And for the same crime, yet! Murder is suddenly a status sport and people are competing to be arrested? I figured I needed some more info if I was to grope my way out of this mist.

"So tell me about it, Face. Give us all the details."

"Can do. The poor fool's blurted out everything. He was hanging around the tavern looking to pick up some easy money for the little luxuries of life. He knows this foreign sailor's got the stuff—sees him pull the paper sheets out of his wallet like it's a giant-size box of Kleenex. So he gets talking to the guy and feeds him a story about some dagga for sale cheap which the sailor swallows whole, follows him outside, meets him in the back alley behind the tavern. Then suddenly he's facing a knife and being told to cough up.

"It's a simple little ripoff and usually works fine but this time something went wrong. The sailor wasn't going to give up the goods. There was a fight. He just couldn't stomach it—tried to lay hold of Peterson, got knifed in the neck. Result: one dead sailor."

I frowned—but not too heavily in case of wrinkles. The Mother City, I thought, was getting to be known as the mother of all ripoffs.

Face was following his own line of thought.

"They should close that nightclub down," he said angrily, shaking the office punch emphatically in one huge fist. "It's just a front for the Chinese mafia anyway. They're taking over everything in this town. I had my way, I'd boot them out of the country, we don't need people like that here."

"You'll break my punch if you go on like that," I laughed, taking it away from him. The guy was really blowing his cool and shaking it like a cocktail shaker.

"Hang, man," he said. "I'm sorry. I wasn't even aware of what I was doing."

He sighed. "I better get back on the job. Sometimes I wish I lived in that land they told us about in school. You know, that land where sausages grow on trees and the rivers run beer and no one has to work. I can't remember the name."

"You mean the Land of Cockaigne."

"That's the one! See you around."

I sat for a while after he had gone, thinking about what he'd told me. His words carried a ring of conviction. And what's more, the police appeared to be satisfied they had the right person.

I fished out the *Cape Times*. It was the morning paper and there was no report of the arrest, but there was a short piece on the murder which stated that the victim had been knifed.

What price Mrs. Gabrielli and her beastly gun, then? No takers for her story, I guess. She must have fantasized the whole spiel. Crumbs! No wonder this doll needed to see Raffael! Though I doubt if even he can get her feet back on earth. She's so spaced out Cape Canaveral will have to send a space probe.

As if my thoughts had conjured Raffael up, he appeared in the doorway.

He was wearing a worn track suit with the words "Jung and Easily Freudened" printed across the chest and a pair of jogging shoes which had seen better days and were curling up with nostalgia for them. In a just and perfect world they would have been honourably retired from service months ago. He was running gently on the spot, flexing his feet, and gazing out the French window in a distract fashion.

I just do not understand this fashion for jogging. Raffael has tried to get me to join him, but not this baby! Certainly I think a girl should exercise her muscles, but she should be selective. A girl needs muscles, for example, to keep her smile in place when her man is telling her, for the third time, in detail, how his team scored a goal in the rugby match last Saturday. But that is not the sort of muscle jogging will develop. No, more likely it will lead to dropped arches and dropped everything else. Forget it!

"I had planned on taking a run along the beach front," Raffael murmured regretfully, "but now I suppose I'd better phone the police."

These words kindled a cozy glow in my heart. For once I knew more than Raffael and could set him right. I smiled at him, trying unsuccessfully not to look smug.

"You go and get on with your jogging, there's a good lad. And

trust the police to do what's right about the murder. They've already arrested the man who did it. It wasn't Mrs. Gabrielli."

"Mrs. Gabrielli?" Raffael came to a halt and blinked at me. "What's she got to do with this?"

"You know, she confessed to you," I said patiently, formulating for my own satisfaction a few choice thoughts on analysts who lost their memory and their marbles at the same time. "You gave me the tape to type."

"Oh, that. You surely didn't imagine her story had any direct relation to real events?"

"Well, I . . ." I faltered.

"Mrs. Gabrielli's problems stem from an unresolved Oedipus Complex, Vesper. Her story was, in any case, obviously a fantasy since the victim at Tommy's Tavern was stabbed, not shot. The gun she talks about is clearly a sexual symbol."

Raffael looked at me soulfully.

"Perhaps I should teach you something about sexual symbolism."

"Er . . ." I said evasively, then continued, "but then why do you want to call the police?"

"But my dear Vesper," Raffael said patiently, "I've just overheard Security Officer de Wet confess to you that he's murdered someone."

I gaped at him worriedly. The man was perhaps having aural delusions?

Raffael sat on the edge of my desk, picked up the phone, and gave a number. When his number came on the line he identified himself and then said:

"I need to know if a body has been discovered very recently, possibly in the vicinity of the waterfront, perhaps in one of the derelict houses near the new excavation. The victim will probably be a sailor. Death due to a drug overdose."

He waited for a while, then said, "Yes?" and listened intently.

"That's what I thought. You'd better send someone along to see me. I have the murderer for you."

Raffael gave some directions and then put the phone down.

"This morning, early, a workman was on his way to the Irving and Johnson sheds just across the quay from us. He was walking past those derelict houses at the edge of the new marina excavation when he noticed a padlock had been sprung and one of the doors was ajar. He mentioned it to his boss, who called the police. They sent a patrol van which I noticed this morning when I looked

out the window. They discovered a body inside the house. The dead man was a Bolivian sailor. The police medic says he died of a drug overdose."

"So where's the connection with Face?" I objected.

"This is what I surmise," Raffael began. "De Wet has been involved in a cocaine-smuggling racket, using Bolivian sailors to bring the stuff into the country. They pack the drugs in condoms—I blushed—"and swallow them to get the drugs through Customs. De Wet has been meeting the runners at night in the derelict house nearby. They handed over the cocaine and he paid them a sum which he would get back many times over when he disposed of the drug in this country.

"He's been making a lot of easy money for who knows how long. But something went wrong this time. From his hostility to the Chinese mafia I'd say they've stepped in and taken over his operation. Perhaps that's what his victim had to tell him when he went to that fatal meeting. Certainly he wasn't going to hand over the cocaine. He'd kept it swallowed for safety. Ironically it turned out to be very unsafe indeed. There was a quarrel and a fight broke out. De Wet hit the man an unlucky blow in the stomach. A condom broke, releasing the cocaine into his system. That was it. He was a dead man. De Wet fled, leaving the door unlocked."

"But what did Face say to give you the idea that he is the person involved? I don't understand."

"You should learn to listen more attentively to what people are saying *underneath* what they are saying, Vesper," Raffael said, blinking mildly at me through his granny specs.

"De Wet killed a man last night. Today, as is only natural, that terrible event is dominating his thoughts, and images of what happened appear like distorted mirages in his speech.

"The murder he committed is the reason for his obsessive interest in the Tommy's Tavern murder, in which, of course, the victim was also a sailor. In the course of describing this murder to you, his unconscious threw up ambiguous phrases which also described the murder he had committed. As he said of the Tommy's Tavern murderer, 'the poor fool blurted out everything.'"

"Did he describe his murder? I can't remember," I admitted.

"His words, roughly, were: 'The foreign sailor's got the stuff . . . drugs . . . The sailor swallows whole . . . He wasn't going to give up the goods . . . There was a fight . . . He just couldn't stomach it . . . Result: one dead sailor.'"

"He said 'dagga' not 'drugs,'" I said quickly, "so how do you know it was cocaine being smuggled?"

Raffael's eyes glistened with enthusiasm.

"Through a classic case of Freudian forgetfulness. If you think back you'll remember there was a word which was on the tip of his tongue but he just couldn't recall it. A word which had become so disturbing to him as to cause a conflict in his mind and block his memory."

"Land of Cockaigne," I exclaimed, beginning to get quite enthralled.

"And," Raffael nodded, egging me on, "a similar conflict led to a mispronunciation which gave me a clue as to both the method of smuggling and the instrument of death."

"Instead of 'condemned to death' he said 'condomned to death,'" I marvelled.

"Do you see now how the disturbing thoughts of his unconscious forced themselves into his speech?"

"What about the way he seemed drawn to the office punch?" I pondered. "Isn't that significant?"

"Excellent deduction," Raffael approved and I glowed so, I might have left off the Tawny-Rose blusher I applied this morning.

"The 'punch' is associated in his mind with the fatal blow he gave his victim. So he worried at it like a tongue worries a tooth that aches.

"Incidentally, you appear to think that his nickname is 'Face,' eff-ay-see-ee? Well, I think you'll find that it's actually the Afrikaans 'Vuis,' in other words, 'Fist.' With fists as large as his he might well have some boxing experience in his past."

Raffael Goodsink flicked me on the cheek with a gentle finger. It was not an unpleasant experience.

"Yes, and to pick up De Wet's words 'hang, man'—Hangman?" I said. "Probably not, since the victim's death seems to have been accidental. But a long stretch in prison for 'Vuis,' nevertheless."

"We'll make an analyst of you yet, Vesper," he grinned. "I thought so the day I interviewed you and you asked me whether there was an 'hr' missing from my name." ●





by Jon L. Breen

A good trivia challenge for popular fiction fans would be to make a list of writers who have contributed substantially, i.e., not just occasionally, to both crime and science fiction. Off the top of a minutiae-crowded head, I can think of Anthony Boucher, Fredric Brown, Henry Kuttner, John Holbrook (Jack) Vance, Ron Goulart, Kate Wilhelm, Isaac Asimov, Leigh Brackett, William F. Nolan, Wilson Tucker, Randall Garrett, Poul Anderson, Dean R. Koontz—and I've undoubtedly missed some obvious ones. A long-time s.f. writer who has crossed over into the mystery field recently is Richard A. Lupoff, the comic art historian, parodist, and Edgar Rice Burroughs biographer whose life in print (1952 to the present) can be sampled in *Before . . . 12:01 . . . and After* (Fedogan & Bremer, 603 Washington Ave. S.E., Suite 77, Min-

neapolis, MN 55414-2950; \$27 trade, \$95 signed limited). Apart from the pleasures of the stories included, Robert Silverberg's foreword and Lupoff's introduction and notes give a riveting account of the joys and frustrations of a professional writer's life. Though most of the selections, including "12:01," a terrific 1973 tale that anticipates (to put it carefully) the plot gimmick of the film *Groundhog Day*, are outside the mystery genre, there is much to interest this magazine's readers, including "Dog-walker," a dark suspense gem from *EQMM* (April 1996), and "The Woodstock West Killer," a strong case for Berkeley cop Marvia Plum, who shares the central role in most of Lupoff's mystery novels—but is absent from the latest.

**** Richard A. Lupoff: *The Silver Chariot Killer*, St. Martin's, \$20.95. His romance with Mar-

© 1997 by Jon L. Breen

THE JURY BOX: Jon L. Breen

75

via apparently ended by her marriage, Hobart Lindsey goes it alone in searching New York for the killer of his friend and fellow insurance sleuth Cletus Berry, whose final investigation concerned a toy chariot, once allegedly played with by Julius Caesar, that disappeared after being exhibited at the Italian pavilion of the 1939 World's Fair. As usual, the well-integrated bits of history, the numerous pop-culture references (including many to *The Maltese Falcon*), and the vivid evocation of character add up to sheer reader pleasure. The novel also includes a good depiction of on-line culture, in which children are often far ahead of their parents. Lupoff's custom is to have a famous mystery writer introduce his novels; this time, appropriately, it's Roman specialist Steven Saylor.

*** J. Madison Davis: *And the Angels Sing*, Permanent Press, Noyac Road, Sag Harbor, NY 11963; \$24. Twentieth-century history buffs should also enjoy the tale of band singer Carl Walthers (stage name: Carl Carlson, the Carolina Crooner), a World War II draftee whose language skills and early wounding lead him to a job interpreting for German prisoners of war at an army camp near Cleveland. A mob figure, whose name has understandably been

shortened from Mussolini to Musso, wants Carl's assistance in tracing an old enemy, and the murder of a child near the camp creates suspicion of both prisoners and captors. The plot is only serviceable, but the seldom-utilized big-band and prison-camp backgrounds are admirably exploited.

*** Anne Perry: *Weighed in the Balance*, Fawcett Columbine, \$23. Barrister Sir Oliver Rathbone, who has become a more and more central character in the outstanding series featuring amnesiac former London policeman William Monk and Crimean War nurse Hester Latterly, defends Countess Zorah Rostova of Felzburg, a small German state, sued for slander for accusing Princess Gisela, for whom Prince Friedrich gave up the Felzburg throne, of the murder of her husband. The leisurely pace sometimes lapses into padding, and many readers will foresee the single feasible solution, but even lesser Perry is worth a recommendation.

*** Miriam Grace Monfredo: *Through a Gold Eagle*, Berkley, \$21.95. The formidable series about Seneca Falls, New York librarian Glynis Tryon has much in common with Perry's Monk-Latterly-Rathbone novels: a richly detailed mid-nineteenth-century period, a strongly feminist sensibility, a

prickly relationship between the male and female leads, and frequent legal wrangles and courtroom scenes. Counterfeiting, a major problem of the time, is central to the fourth in the series, whose author shares a devotion to fair-play clue planting with her fellow Rochester resident Edward D. Hoch.

*** William L. DeAndrea: *Killed in the Fog*, Simon & Schuster, \$21. Fed up with TV network troubleshooting, Matt Cobb moves to Great Britain only to encounter more of the same. This rates in the bottom half of the eight-book Cobb series, but the American's-eye-view of English customs and mores, the customary bright narrative, the fair-play puzzle, and the chapter-heading quotes from British TV should provide ample motivation for the author's fans to pick it up.

*** Luke Salisbury: *Blue Eden*, The Smith, 69 Joralemon St., Brooklyn, NY, 11201-4003; \$21.95 hardcover, \$14.50 paper. Three connected stories set in 1934, 1947, and 1972 look at the relationship of FBI chief J. Edgar Hoover and Grover Jones, black proprietor of a Washington, D.C. diner. Though involving crime (the career of John Dillinger, a plot to kill Jackie Robinson, and the JFK assassination), the book belongs more to "literary" than to mystery fic-

tion. The first and third stories, which sometimes threaten to drown the reader in the stream of consciousness, are only marginally successful, but the middle tale, "The Number of the Beast," is a gem, thanks to the vivid presence of retired baseball great and racist wild man Ty Cobb, who visits the diner and memorably spars with Jones over the merits of black and white ballplayers.

*** Ed McBain: *Gladly the Cross-Eyed Bear*, Warner, \$23. Florida lawyer Matthew Hope becomes embroiled in a duel between two toymakers over the right to market a cross-eyed teddy bear. Murder, of course, results. The novel also describes Hope's recovery following a coma induced by a couple of gunshot wounds. (See *There Was a Little Girl* [1994].) Maybe not the best McBain, but reliably entertaining.

** A. E. Eddenden: *Murder at the Movies*, Academy Chicago, \$20. If you would like a tongue-in-cheek whiff of the Golden-Age style of absurdly elaborate mystery plotting, along with a chance to recall how many great movies came out in 1939, the brief third novel about Fort York, Ontario's Inspector Albert Tretheway will provide you a couple of hours' pleasure. (If you don't want those things, forget it.)

LIKE FATHER, LIKE SON

by Richard T. Chizmar

Father's Day was always a big deal when I was growing up. The old man loved it. Breakfast in bed (and let me tell you, back in those days, Mom made a ham and egg omelet so big the plate could barely hold it). Afternoon barbeque in the backyard. Horse-shoes. Ball-tossing. Lots of laughter and silly stuff. And then an evening drive downtown for ice cream cones and milkshakes; all four windows

Author of some forty short stories, Richard Chizmar has been described by Jon L. Breen as a "highly talented dark suspense writer with a wide range of subject matter and a knack for clear, straightforward, but evocative prose." For more of Mr. Chizmar's stories, see *Midnight Promises* (Gauntlet Publications). †

rolled down, cool spring air blushing our cheeks; Dad at the wheel, singing along with the radio in that crazy voice of his, big hands swallowing up the steering wheel; Mom, sitting sideways in the passenger seat, rolling her eyes at us, feigning embarrassment.

There were three of us boys—the three stooges, Dad always called us. I was the oldest and most of the responsibilities fell on my shoulders. Come the big weekend, I was in charge of making sure the lawn was mowed, the hedges clipped, and the sidewalk swept. I was the one every year who bought the card down at Finch's Grocery Mart and made sure that Marty and Lawrence signed it. And, most importantly, I was in charge of organizing the gifts. Of course, back when we were kids, our presents were never very expensive or fancy. Usually just something simple we'd each made in school. Individually wrapped and sealed tight with a few yards of shiny Scotch tape so as to prolong the official gift-opening ceremony after breakfast.

The first gift I can remember making was an ashtray in the shape of a bullfrog. Painted green, of course. Very bright green. The only frog in class with big yellow teeth, too. Dad loved it. Let

out a bellow that rattled the bed frame when he pulled it from the box. Shook my tiny hand and told me how proud he was of me. And he was too; you could just tell.

Then there was the year that Marty gave the old man a wooden pipe-holder for his desktop. Sanded and polished and varnished to a fine finish, it was a thing of beauty; it really was. To this day, I think Marty could've had a successful career as a craftsman; it was that nice a job.

Lawrence, who was the youngest and the brightest, was the writer of the family, and for a three-year period in his early teens he gave the old man an "original Lawrence Finley book" each Father's Day. Each "book" was composed of five short chapters, and each chapter ended with a suspenseful cliff-hanger. They were written out in dark, clear script on folded construction paper and carefully stapled down the middle. A remarkably detailed pencil sketch marked the title page of each new volume. The stories themselves were equally impressive: They featured the old man as an outlaw gunfighter in the Old West. Strong and brave and with a heart of gold. A Wild-West Robin Hood with a six-shooter on his hip and a fast white horse named Gypsy. Of all the gifts the three of us gave him back when we were kids, I think these stories were the old man's favorites. Not that he ever would've admitted it, of course.

Years later, when all three of us were over at the University and working good part-time jobs, we each saved up and chipped in for something special: a John Deere riding mower. A brand spanking new one with a big red ribbon laced through the steering wheel. We surprised him with it right after breakfast that year, and he flat out couldn't believe his eyes. Neither could we; it was the first time any of us—Mom included—had ever seen the old guy speechless. Makes me smile even now just to think about it. Makes me smile even more when I remember all the times I called home from college and Mom would tell me he couldn't come to the phone right now because he was out cutting the lawn . . . again . . . for the second time that week.

Yes, sir, Father's Day was always a big deal back when I was growing up.

The drive out to Hagerstown Prison takes just under three hours on a good day. I figure the traffic will be heavier than usual this morning so I leave when it's still dark. I ride with the radio off and the heat on; it rained last night and the June air has a nasty bite to it.

I drive the winding country roads faster than I should, but visiting hours have been extended because of the holiday and I want to show up a few minutes early to get a head start on the registration forms and to check in the gifts I've brought along with me. In the backseat, I have a big bag of freshly baked chocolate chip cookies, a stack of brand new paperbacks—Westerns, mostly—and a half-dozen pouches of his favorite pipe tobacco.

The road is fairly clear and the trip takes two hours and thirty-five minutes. Plenty of time for a man to think—even if he doesn't want to.

When I step out onto the gravel parking lot, the morning sun is shining and the chill has vanished from the air. I can hear birds singing in the trees across the way, and I can't help but wonder what they must sound like to the men locked inside these walls.

There are already a scattered handful of visitors waiting inside the lobby. Mostly young women with pale, dirty, restless children. But a few older couples too. None of them look up at me when I take off my coat and sit down, but the hush of whispering momentarily fades to silence, then picks up again. In all my visits here, I've never once heard anyone speak in a normal tone of voice in this room; only whispers. It's always like this in the waiting room. There's an awkward kind of acceptance here. No one gawks or stares. It's like we're all charter members of the same club—each and every one of us joined together by our love for someone behind these bars and each of us sharing the same white-hot emotions of embarrassment and fear and despair that coming here brings to the surface.

My father has been here for almost three years now. And unless his case is reopened—which is very unlikely—he will remain here until the day he dies. I don't like to think about that, though. I'd rather dream about the day when he might be free again to spend his retirement back where he belongs—back at the house with me.

But we both know that day will never come. He will never come home again . . . and still the old man claims he has no regrets. Swears he'd do it all over again in a heartbeat. "After all," he tells me, "I was just protecting my family."

Sometimes families just drift apart and it's almost impossible to put a finger on the reason. Age-old secrets remain secret. Hidden feelings remain hidden. Sometimes the family was never really that close in the first place, and it simply took the passage of time to bring this sad fact to light.

But you know, that's the funny thing. We never drifted apart. We remained close right up to a point and then *BOOM*—it was

over. One day we're a family; the next day we're not. It was almost as if Marty and Lawrence had gotten together behind our backs and planned the whole terrible thing.

After college, Marty went into real estate. He married a snobby woman named Jennifer (not Jenny or Jen, but Jennifer) and moved east to Annapolis and earned a six-figure income selling waterfront property to yuppies. By the time he was thirty-five, he'd had two boys of his own, divorced Jennifer after discovering that she'd been unfaithful with a coworker, and entered into a second marriage, this time with an older woman who also worked in real estate. I've never met her, but her name is Vicki and she has a very pleasant voice and is downright friendly on the telephone.

Lawrence, who turned out to be not only the brightest, but also the hardest-working Finley boy, put his creative skills to profitable use—he went into advertising. He worked a back-breaking schedule and squirreled away his pennies for damn near a decade, then opened his own small agency in downtown Baltimore when he was still in his early thirties. A handful of years later, he was one of the field's fastest risers, appeared regularly in all the trade magazines, and oversaw an operation of some two dozen employees. Last year (I read this in the newspaper; we haven't spoken in over five years), he opened a second office—in New York City.

But for all of their successes, it quickly became apparent that Marty and Lawrence had changed. And for the worse. Sure, there were gifts and cards at Christmas and on birthdays, but that was pretty much it. Mom and Dad and I rarely spoke with the two of them—much less saw them—and whenever friends and neighbors asked, our responses were quick, our smiles forced. For a couple of years we kept trying, we honestly did, but our letters went mostly unanswered, our phone calls ignored. The whole situation made Mom and Dad furious. They'd sit around the dining room table, nibbling at their desserts, and say, "If they're so ashamed of their small-town roots and their small-town family, then so be it. Couple of big shots is what they think they are. Good riddance to them." But I could see past their bitterness and resentment. At the end of the day, they were just like me—they were left feeling hurt and confused and abandoned. And it was a miserable feeling, let me tell you. Things like this might happen to other families, but for God's sake, not the Finleys.

And so, just like that, we became a family of three.

And, soon after, a family of two.

Mom died in her sleep on Easter weekend 1989, and everyone—

including Dad—thought it was a good thing. She'd been suffering something terrible. Lung cancer, if you can believe that. Only sixty years old and never smoked a day in her life.

Of course, neither Marty nor Lawrence made it home for the funeral. And if you ask me (and the state police boys *did* ask me in a roundabout way later on), Mom's death, coupled with their failure to show up at the service, was the final straw. Something inside the old man's mind snapped and he was never the same again.

Shortly after, he began bringing home the cats. Strays, store-bought; it didn't matter a lick. Sometimes as many as two or three a month. His new family, he called them. The two of us need a family to take care of, he'd say. A family that will stay together and live under the same roof. Just wait and see.

By Christmas later that year, we were living with more than twenty cats of various sizes, shapes, and colors. The old man had a name for each and every one of them. And I have to admit, he was right; we were like a family again. He must have felt it too; he was the happiest I'd seen him in a long time.

Then, just after Easter, right after the first anniversary of Mom's passing, the old man lost it and killed the Benson kid and all hell broke loose.

The drive home takes forever. It's raining, again—really coming down now in thick, flapping sheets—and it's all I can do to keep the tires on the road. I change the radio station; try to think of something cheerful, but I can't stop myself from thinking of his eyes. Sparkling with such happiness and love, pleased with my gifts, overjoyed with my presence on his special day. But then, as always, the conversation turns and he is asking about his family, and his eyes are transforming into something alien and frightening. Eyes so focused and intense and determined they belong to someone years younger; they are the eyes of the stranger who stormed out of the house and chased down the Benson kid that night.

So that's when I take his trembling hand and gently squeeze and tell him what I always tell him: that they are fine. That I am taking good care of them. That his family is safe and sound, and they are all very happy and healthy. Before I leave he almost breaks my heart when he thanks me with fat tears streaming down his cheeks, and in a quaking voice tells me that I am the man of the family now, the one responsible for their care.

It is after midnight when I pull into the mud-streaked driveway. In the shine of the headlights, I glimpse a blur of black and white

fur flash past me and disappear beneath the front porch. For just one moment, I can't decide if I should laugh or cry.

As for me . . . well, I'm still here. I never did leave this town (except for college and, hell, even then, I was back living in my old room ten days after graduation). I never did marry. Never had children. Never made my first million. In fact, you can still find me six days a week working the desk over at Bradshaw County Library and every other Saturday night taking tickets at the movie theater downtown. Not very exciting, I'm afraid.

But, you know, that's okay with me. I turned forty-six a month ago today. I'm finally starting to lose a little ground—going bald on top and a little pudgy on the bottom. Started wearing glasses awhile back, too. The kids at the library snicker behind my back once in a while, but they're just being kids; they don't mean anything by it. And, sure, I hear the whispering sometimes, I know the stories they tell—about how old man Finley went off his rocker and strangled little Billy Benson with his bare hands. And all because he'd set one of the old man's cats on fire.

I know they're starting to talk about me too: about how I'm just as crazy as my old man was. Spending all that time in a house full of stinky old cats. Just like an old blue-haired spinster.

But you know what? I don't mind. Despite everything, I still like this town. I still like my life. There's just something that feels right about it. That's the best way I can explain it. It just feels *right*.

Sure there are nights—usually after drinking too many beers out on the front porch—when I lie awake in bed and stare off into the darkness and wonder what else my life might amount to. I wonder about Marty and Lawrence and why they did what they did. I wonder about Mom and what she would think about all this if she were still alive. And I can't help but wonder about the old man and those haunted eyes of his and that old green bullfrog ashtray and the evening drives for ice cream we used to take back when I was a little kid. But, you know, nothing good ever comes from those thoughts. There are never any easy answers, and those nights are long and lonely and sometimes even a little scary.

But then, when I awake the next morning and feel the sunlight on my face and smell the coffee in the air and hear the purrs of my family as they gather around my ankles, I have all the answers I'll ever need.

And I'll tell you something else . . . like father, like son. I have no regrets. Not a one. ●

THE TOWN WHERE NO ONE STAYED OVER

by Edward D. Hoch

Simon Ark's phone call from Buffalo caught me at the office on the one day a week that I still went in to Neptune Books to deal with my dwindling editorial responsibilities. It had been nearly a year since I'd shared an adventure with Simon, but such gaps in our relationship were not uncommon.

"My friend," his familiar voice boomed in my ear. "Meet me in Buffalo this evening and I will show you a grand old time!"

I knew what that meant, coming from Simon. "I'm getting too old for your sort of grand old times, prowling around muddy graveyards and ancient ruins."

"There are no ancient ruins in western New York," he said with a chuckle. "As for muddy graveyards, they tell me it hasn't rained here in two weeks."

Still, I was dubious. "I don't know, Simon. What brought you up there?"

"The little town of Harker Mews. Ever heard of it?"

"No."

"Then come!" he urged. "Unless there's some problem with Shelly."

"No." He knew my wife sometimes objected to our excursions

A 2,000-year-old coptic priest who investigates exotic crimes?

The author tells us we may give credence to the supernatural elements in his Simon Ark stories or not, according to our taste.

Each of the mysteries involving Ark is capable of a rational interpretation, but can we really be sure that Ark, who returns to *EQMM* after a fourteen-year hiatus, is not what he says he is? **P**

together when they kept me away from home. "She's in North Carolina visiting her sister."

"Ah! Then you have no excuse."

"Is it worth flying up there for a day?"

"You'll be here in less than an hour. And figure two days."

I knew I was going. I always did. "Where will I meet you?"

"I'll be at the Buffalo airport."

And he was good to his word. I stepped off the plane that evening carrying an overnight bag and he was waiting at the gate, a tall, slightly overweight figure dressed all in black. Despite his white hair, his face did not appear especially old from a distance. It was only up close that one became aware of the tiny lines of age that crisscrossed the skin and gave it an almost leathery appearance. He claimed sometimes to be two thousand years old, to have been a Coptic priest back in Egypt with a mission to seek out the Devil and his works. I only knew him as a wise man, a very good man, and a friend who had been there through most of my life. My wife disliked him because she could not understand him, and I'd never told her that during the early years of our marriage he'd once kept us from splitting up.

"Do you have a car?" I asked him now, knowing he didn't drive.

"No, no. We must rent a car. Our destination is about an hour south of here."

"Did you lure me up here just to be your driver?" I asked. It had happened before.

"My friend, I lured you up here, as you put it, to show you something you've never seen. Is that not reason enough to come?"

"Of course, Simon," I said with a grin. "You alone would be reason enough to come."

He had booked rooms at a small airport hotel where we spent the night. Before we retired he showed me a map of western New York, pointing out a tiny dot inland from Lake Erie that was marked *Harker Mews*. I studied the map, tracing with my finger the best route from our airport location. "What's this Mews business?" I asked. "Sounds English."

"It is. It's the word formerly used for a stables. Perhaps the early settlers there were English."

"And what's unusual enough to prompt a visit by Simon Ark?"

"It is a city of psychics, or a town of telepathists, to be more accurate. With quiet inbreeding they have achieved remarkable results."

"How did you learn of this place? Did *National Geographic* run a story on it?"

Simon had long ago come to tolerate my jesting comments. "As a matter of fact, a postman told me about it. He was vacationing in Toronto last week and I met him at the Royal Ontario Museum. A fascinating man named Joe Caldwell."

"Fascinating in what way?"

"He delivers mail to Harker Mews. He had many strange stories to tell me."

"I wouldn't think a town full of telepaths would have any need for the U.S. Mail," I commented drily. "Did you get me all the way up here for this?"

"He mentioned other matters," Simon answered vaguely. "I must see this place for myself, and talk to the residents. As you know, I always value your assistance at such times."

I slept fitfully, wishing I was home in my own bed. In the morning, over breakfast, Simon told me a bit more. "The mailman claims no visitors ever stay overnight in Harker Mews. Around the area there's a belief that at night the psychic waves are so strong they would kill anyone not attuned to them, and there have been cases of visitors dying from unknown causes. Many of the residents are quite elderly, but they go about their business just as they always have, immune to any such forces."

"What is their business?"

"Once there was a salt mine in the town, but that's been shut down for a generation. Now the people who live there give séances, tell fortunes, practice a bit of magic now and again. I'm told folks come from Buffalo and Rochester and even from as far off as Pittsburgh and Cleveland to learn what the future holds for them, or to communicate with deceased loved ones. Joe Caldwell said the summer business is especially good because there are always people driving up from nearby Chautauqua Lake."

"Are you planning to try staying overnight?" I asked. It was exactly the sort of thing that would appeal to him.

Simon shook his head. "No need to tempt fate. Not yet, anyway. The postman tells me there are no hotels and the houses are all very small; but if we need to stay over, there's a motel in the next town."

"I'll rent a car and we'll drive down there for the day. Be back by nightfall."

Simon Ark smiled. "Or we might be the next ones to die in Harker Mews."

We were on the road by nine o'clock, heading south through the humid August morning toward a town I'd never heard of twenty-

four hours earlier. Oddly, Simon spoke very little about what we might find there, preferring to reminisce about other times, other places. In an hour, just as I spotted the first sign announcing Harker Mews, a small mail truck pulled onto the highway ahead of us.

"Is that your friend?" I asked Simon.

"It might be. He had to return to the job this week."

When the mail truck stopped at one of the boxes along the route, I pulled up beside it. The driver was a husky young man who recognized Simon at once. "Mr. Ark! So you've come to look the place over!"

Simon introduced me and I parked so we could get out for a few minutes' conversation. Joe Caldwell had blond hair and a boyish grin, but it was hard to imagine him encountering Simon in a Toronto museum. After introducing me, Simon asked if we were on the right road for Harker Mews. "This is it," Caldwell confirmed. "About two miles along you'll start to see the houses. If you talk to anyone, don't say I sent you. These folks can get touchy at times. And remember what I said. Don't stay overnight. A truck driver named Elmer Aldrich was found dead there just last month."

"We won't," I assured him. I was already thinking about heading back.

We drove on ahead as he continued pausing at the mailboxes along his route. Presently we began to encounter small cottages set close together on either side of the highway. In many of their windows were cardboard signs advertising *Fortunes Told—\$10.00* or *Tarot a Specialty!* One said *Tea Leaf Readings* and another proclaimed *Afternoon Séances Arranged*. Cars with New York and out-of-state license plates were parked in front of some of the houses. We passed about thirty cottages and a crossroads with a gas station, convenience store, and a small church before the settlement petered out into farmlands and grape orchards, with an occasional dirt road running off toward the distant woods. I turned around in a farmer's driveway and we went back to the convenience store.

The inside looked like a modern version of the general store from another era, with a state lottery machine replacing the old cracker barrel. The clerk was a young man with curly hair, perhaps in his mid twenties. "Looking for anything special?" he asked. The only other customer was a slender, dark-haired woman in her early thirties, eating an ice-cream bar. She wore cut-off jeans and a Chautauqua Lake T-shirt.

"We were passing through," Simon Ark said, "and couldn't help noticing all the signs in the windows of the houses."

"Yeah," the clerk said. "A lot of them go in for fortunetelling and stuff like that."

"Who's a good one to try?"

The question brought no immediate response from the young man, and the woman customer stopped munching her ice-cream bar to join in the conversation. "You want a séance or a straight reading?" she asked. "I can do your palms for five dollars if that's all you want."

Simon turned his palms over and stared at them, as if considering the offer. "All right. Five dollars it is."

"Each."

I passed her a ten-dollar bill and watched as she finished the ice cream, wiped off her hands, and went to work. The young clerk tried to ignore the whole thing.

She held Simon's hands in her own, studying them intently, feeling the rough skin, trying to trace the grooves. "What's your name?" she asked, giving the cash customer her best smile.

"Simon Ark."

"I'm Beth Tolliver. Palms are just a sideline with me. I teach school. Say, you've got a lot of miles on these hands."

"Do you foresee a long life?"

"I do. You'll probably be getting hundredth-birthday wishes from the President."

She came to my hands next. "Not quite so good as Mr. Ark, but not bad. They're soft." She smiled at me. "You've had an easy life."

"It just seems easy."

"Both of you have much to look forward to. Good health, happiness, and long lives." She released my hands and smiled at us. "I hope we'll meet again. Bye for now. Bye, Sam." The fellow behind the counter waved, his mouth hanging open.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked him.

"I think she just conned you guys out of ten bucks! She's no palm reader. She doesn't even live in Harker Mews."

"Where is she from?" Simon asked.

"South of here. Jamestown, I think. She comes up every week during the summer to see her mother. Sometimes she stays overnight."

His words seemed to give Simon an idea of how to proceed. "Which house does the mother live in? Perhaps we can get our money back."

"Third house down on this side. The one with the séance sign in the window. Her mother's name is Sylvia Tolliver." He seemed to regret what he'd said earlier. "Don't mention my name."

Simon Ark smiled. "I don't even know what it is, except Sam."

"Sam Gates. I'm here ten in the morning till ten at night while the boss is on vacation. I don't want it to get back to him that I bad-mouth customers. I got nothing against Beth Tolliver. She's a nice lady."

Once we were outside I stood for a moment gazing down the road at the rows of neat cottages and said, "No one wants their name mentioned around here. It's as if they were afraid of something."

"Perhaps they are, my friend. Let us see for ourselves if that fear is justified."

The third house down looked much like those on either side of it. There were neat curtains in the windows but the exterior paint was beginning to peel here and there. The cardboard sign with its message of *Afternoon Séances Arranged* seemed almost like an afterthought, something put there to keep up with the neighbors. Across the street I could see two women leaving the tarot house with smiles on their faces. We went up to the door and I rang the bell.

The short woman who answered was probably in her sixties, but she'd kept her hair dark and bore a resemblance to her daughter who read palms, two for ten dollars. "You want a séance?" she asked.

"Perhaps, Mrs. Tolliver," Simon told her, speaking over my shoulder. "We just met your daughter at the local convenience store."

"My daughter?" Her expression turned puzzled, then sly. "I have no daughter."

"Beth Tolliver. She looks like you."

"Beth's been gone for eight years now."

"Gone?"

"Dead." The woman started to shut the door.

"We want a séance," Simon Ark decided suddenly. "How much do you charge?"

She hesitated and opened the door a bit farther. "We need at least four. I'd have to get one of the neighbors to sit in." Eyeing us up and down, as if gauging the weight of our wallets, she finally decided, "Fifty dollars for everything."

I took the money from my wallet and handed it to her. Ever since my company had published a book by Simon some years ago he'd expected me to pay the little expenses of our journeys. "Take

it off the next book," he'd tell me. The promise of that book kept stretching farther into the future.

Sylvia Tolliver's little house was furnished like something from a fever dream, with religious icons battling for wall space with symbols both exotic and erotic. There were strange prints of moonlit countrysides by a British artist aptly named Grimshaw, and fuzzy double-exposed photographs that may have been intended to suggest the spirit world. In the center of the small dining room was an octagonal table covered by a circular cloth of fine lace. It was the sort of thing a grandmother might have carried over from the old country.

"Please be seated," she said, patting two of the chairs that stood by the table. "I'll just go get Mr. Maitland from next door."

"What's all this supposed to prove?" I asked Simon when we were alone.

"We shall see, my friend. The events at Harker Mews pose a number of interesting questions."

The Tolliver woman returned almost at once with a man about her own age. He was short and balding and wore thick gold-framed glasses. "This is Matt Maitland, my neighbor," she said with a bit of pride.

We shook hands and Simon asked the man, "Are you a practitioner of the ancient arts too, Mr. Maitland?"

The little man smiled. "There are no ancient arts in Harker Mews. We call it New Age here, Mr. Ark. Sylvia's séances are only her form of channeling, communicating with the spirits of the dead. Once she would have been called a medium. Today she is a channeler."

"What does the sign in your window say?" Simon asked.

"Tea leaves. I'm quite good at it."

Sylvia Tolliver gave a little chuckle. "Matt will tell you he's descended from the Fox sisters, the famous spiritualists of the last century. They produced their table rappings in Hydesville and Rochester, not that far from here."

Simon Ark was not impressed. "I believe Margaret Fox admitted late in life that she produced the rapping noises through manipulation of her joints."

Matt Maitland nodded. "That's quite correct. It is an unfortunate truth that those who communicate with the spirit world, when they suffer a loss of their powers, often resort to fraud and trickery to continue in the profession."

"Enough of talk!" Sylvia said. "Let us all take our seats." She hurried to close the curtains on the windows and a drape over the

kitchen doorway, though a good deal of light still filtered into the room. "Now, Mr. Ark, who do you wish to contact on the other side? On occasion I have been successful in reaching extraterrestrials and representatives of ancient societies as well as the recently deceased."

"I wish to contact a man named Elmer Aldrich, a truck driver who died here last month."

Maitland's head jerked up. "He wasn't from here. He was a stranger."

"I know that," Simon Ark said. "What killed him?"

Sylvia Tolliver settled into her chair. "I don't rightly know what he died of. It's said people who come here in the night run a great risk."

"So I've heard."

"If you wish to contact him, I will try. Let us all grasp hands and close the circle. Don't let go!" I found myself seated between the woman and Maitland, across the table from Simon. "Remember that I am only a channeler of communications between the earthly and spiritual worlds," she continued. "I do not levitate tables or engage in other forms of trickery. If I am able to establish contact with Elmer Aldrich, he will speak through my mouth."

"Do you have someone on the other side to guide us?" Simon asked quietly.

"My daughter Beth."

"But—"

"Hush now!" she commanded.

The little room seemed to grow darker as we sat there, but it might only have been the passing of a cloud across the sun. Presently there were strange gurgling sounds emerging from Sylvia's throat, and then a younger female voice was heard. "Why have you summoned me?" it asked. The channeler's lips were moving but the voice seemed to come from somewhere else.

"There is someone here who wishes to speak with Elmer Aldrich, a newcomer to your ranks."

"Aldrich—" The voice softly sung the name. Then, after a moment, "He is here with me."

"Ask him how he died," Simon told her.

"Elmer Aldrich, how did you depart this life?"

I thought we might hear a male voice next, but Sylvia's resources apparently were limited. The same female voice returned again and sang out, "He says he died suddenly, of a great pain in his head. He warns of danger in Harker Mews."

I had finally established that the voice must be coming from the

kitchen behind Sylvia's chair, hidden from view by the drape she'd pulled shut. Deciding this was my chance to reveal the hoax, I broke the circle and grabbed for the drape as Sylvia screamed.

No one was there. The kitchen was empty. But Sylvia Tolliver kept on screaming.

Maitland did his best to calm her, and when we finally left the house with him she was resting in a recliner with a damp cloth over her eyes. "You must never break the circle during a séance!" the little man berated me. "It's a wonder you didn't kill her!"

"I thought her daughter was speaking from the kitchen," I answered, feeling a bit sheepish. Simon Ark said nothing.

"You must realize that communication with the other side is the most delicate of undertakings." Maitland's voice had returned to normal but he was still upset.

Finally Simon Ark spoke. "If there have been unexplained deaths here, the cause must be determined. Perhaps my friend acted a bit hastily but not without reason. You must know yourself that Sylvia is a fraud. We spoke to her daughter Beth not an hour ago. She is very much alive."

Matt Maitland seemed about to offer a response, but all that he finally said was, "There is much here you do not understand. Leave it alone. Get out of Harker Mews while you still can."

"Before nightfall?" Simon asked with the trace of a smile.

"God, yes! Before nightfall!"

I knew Simon was not ready to return to Buffalo, so we decided to stay at a motel near one of the wineries. It was about five miles north of Harker Mews and I already knew what that meant. Despite his promises, Simon was planning a return visit to the town under cover of darkness.

Later that night, when he'd confirmed my suspicion, I asked, "Do you think that's wise? Even if the stories aren't true, people must have a reason for staying away after dark."

He smiled slightly. "I want to find out what that reason is."

Since I could hardly let him go alone, I picked up the keys to the rental car and led the way downstairs. "I hope you know what you're doing, Simon. Why don't you wait till morning and try to get a look at that fellow Aldrich's death certificate?"

"I'm sure it would show heart failure or stroke as the cause of death. Meantime, I fear our presence today in Harker Mews might have set off a chain of unexpected events."

"In what way?"

"Our meeting with Beth Tolliver was pure happenstance. They couldn't have planned for that."

"Who are you talking about? Her mother and the neighbor?"

"Whoever is moving around the town by night."

"Ghosts, Simon. Spirits of the dead." I liked to goad him at times like this. "How do you know Beth Tolliver isn't a ghost?"

"Because ghosts don't eat ice cream."

I had no answer for that. I started the car and we drove down the road toward Harker Mews. It was just after eleven o'clock.

The night was black as we approached our destination, without even the lights of farmhouses to guide us. We saw no other traffic except for a large truck whose headlights blinded us momentarily until it was gone. Then suddenly we'd passed the sign welcoming us to Harker Mews and the dark shapes of the little cottages began to appear on either side of the road. A few had lights. Most were in darkness although the hour was still reasonably early.

As we approached the crossroads, the night light from the convenience store fell across something lying in the middle of the intersection. "Stop the car!" Simon commanded.

I could see now that it was a person, a man, sprawled on his face. The back of his head was bloody. "An auto accident?" I suggested, though no other car was visible.

Simon knelt to lift him a bit. It was the postman, Joe Caldwell, and he was dead. "This was no accident. He's been shot in the back of the head."

At that moment I saw a shadow move out of range of the light and hurry toward the rear of the store. I started to run after it, yelling, "Stop!" but Simon grabbed my shoulder with an iron grip.

"Be careful! The killer is armed."

We both went after him, carefully hugging the buildings, aware that neither of us was likely to outrun a much younger person. To my surprise, it wasn't necessary. As I rounded the back of the building, a young man's voice called out, "I'm here. Don't shoot!"

He stepped out into the pool of light with his hands slightly raised to show they were empty. I saw that it was Sam, the clerk we'd met at the convenience store that afternoon. "A man's been killed," I told him.

"I know. I'd just closed up when I heard the shot. I was looking at the body, thinking what I should do, when I heard your car coming and tried to duck out of sight."

We headed back toward the body, illuminated by the headlights of our car. "Do you recognize him?" Simon asked.

"He looks familiar," he replied with a trace of uncertainty. "Sure! It's the postman, Joe Caldwell! I usually see him in his uniform."

"He's the one who told me about your town."

Gates eyed us both with suspicion. "What are you two, detectives?"

"Not exactly," Simon told him. "We have to report this crime. Is there a police force in Harker Mews?"

He laughed at the idea. "You could call the county sheriff in Mayville, but I think we'll do better with the state police."

"Is there a telephone we could use?"

"I'll call from the store. I was going to do that before you came."

He unlocked the front door and we followed his dusty footprints inside while he made the call. As we waited for the police, outside, Simon examined the fatal wound, then shifted his attention to the postman's hands. "Look at this, under the fingernails," he said to me.

I peered closely in the light from our headlamps. "Some sort of white crystals."

Using the point of a nail file, Simon carefully scraped some of the crystals into his hand and touched his tongue to them. "Tastes salty," he decided. "And it's on the bottom of his shoes too."

Before we could investigate further, a state police car appeared down the road, siren silent but red lights flashing. The trooper was a muscular young man with a nameplate that read *Quinn* attached to his breast pocket. We told him what little we knew and where we were staying, promising to be available for further questioning. "Just driving through?" he asked. "This isn't a main route to anywhere."

"Visiting friends," I answered vaguely. "Someone warned us about this place, said there'd been other deaths here."

Trooper Quinn shrugged. "I guess people die everywhere when their time comes. Lots of old folks in Harker Mews."

"We heard about a truck driver named Aldrich, just last month."

"I never saw the autopsy report on that one, but I haven't heard any rumors of foul play. Not like this one." He motioned toward Caldwell's body and then got on his radio to call it in. Sam Gates had been standing off to one side through all of this. When the trooper started questioning him, I turned and noticed that a few of the neighbors who were still awake had come out of their houses, attracted by the flashing red lights of the police car. One of them was Beth Tolliver, last seen eating her ice-cream bar earlier that day. Now she'd changed to slacks and a light blouse.

Simon Ark was delighted to see her. "Miss Tolliver, it's a pleasure to welcome you back among the living. Your disembodied voice from the hereafter hardly does justice to you."

She smiled slightly. "That's my mother's doing. Whenever I come to visit her I usually end up performing for her customers." She motioned toward the police car. "What happened here?"

"Someone killed the local postman," I told her. "We just happened upon the body."

"Joe Caldwell? He's delivered my mother's mail for years. What was he doing here this late?"

"I'd like to speak with you about that," Simon told her. "Could we drive you back to your mother's?"

"It's just three houses down."

"The car is a good place to talk."

She shrugged and slid into the front seat next to me, careful not to sit in the back with Simon Ark. "What did you want to know?"

"The town has a reputation for being unsafe after dark, especially for visitors. The way I heard the story, the psychic waves are so strong at night that strangers can actually die from them."

Beth Tolliver shook her head. "That's just so much hype for these old folks."

"What are they, Gypsies?"

"Not really. Some of them used to be carnival workers, others just drifted here. Mostly they're retired, like my mom, trying to earn a little extra money. I guess it beats having a fruit stand."

"What about her neighbor, Maitland?"

"He's a different story. He's only lived here about five years and he goes along with all this spiritualism business because everyone else does. He reads tea leaves, for God's sake! But he likes my mother and he helps her out with the séances when she asks."

"As do you. I assume you used some sort of intercom to convey your message from beyond."

"I have a cellular phone in my car, with an open line to a speaker phone hidden in Mom's kitchen. I was only a block away, but I've done it from my home in Jamestown when necessary."

"What do you know about these killings?" he asked.

"This is the only one there's been. I think the locals made up the stories about the others to help their image. Somebody made them up, anyway."

"There was a man named Elmer Aldrich, about a month ago."

"Did you ever see him? The man was a walking corpse! Once he stopped for gas while I was at the store. I think he had can-

cer or AIDS or something. He certainly wasn't murdered."

"Why make up stories about people who spent the night here dying?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. Maybe just to add to the mystique of this place."

I hated to tell her that Harker Mews was just a little country town, a long way from having any sort of mystique.

In the morning we were eating breakfast at the motel when a plainclothes detective from the Criminal Investigation Division of the state police sought us out. "I'm Sergeant Myers, gentlemen," he said, handing us each a business card. "I'm looking into last night's shooting at Harker Mews. I understand you were the ones who found the body."

"That is correct," Simon Ark said, greeting the man with an affable handshake. "Do you have any suspects yet?"

Myers was older than the trooper who'd responded the previous night, but they shared something of the same taciturn manner. He joined us and ordered a cup of coffee from the waitress. "We're pursuing leads. Tell me everything that happened."

Simon related a brief version of events, including his meeting with the victim in Toronto, his interest in the occult, and our visit to Harker Mews. He mentioned the séance at Sylvia Tolliver's place and our return that night to find Caldwell's body in the road.

"He wasn't killed there," Sergeant Myers said. "We can tell that from the blood. It's all on his body and clothes. There's none on the road. We estimate he was killed somewhere else about one to two hours earlier and dumped there." He was warming up now, apparently deciding we were not to be classed as suspects.

"What about the man who was killed last month?" I asked.

He consulted his notes. "Elmer Aldrich."

"That's the one. What killed him?"

"The autopsy was inconclusive. There were burns on his body and evidence of radioactivity. But he was only a self-employed trucker and there've been no reports of nuclear accidents."

"Strange," Simon commented.

"Anyway, there's no proof of any connection with last night's killing of Joe Caldwell. I stopped by Harker Mews this morning and folks are pretty upset about it. They knew and liked the victim, and they're afraid it's some sort of a drug-related thing. They're holding a town meeting at the church tonight at seven. I plan to be there to answer any questions they might have."

"Do you think it's drug related?" Simon asked.

"Drugs are a common explanation for any act of violence these days, but I can't see the old folks in Harker Mews as much of a market for coke or pot. Dumping the body like that does make it look like some sort of gang killing, though."

They talked awhile longer, but in the end Sergeant Myers went away without any new information. "We may see you at tonight's meeting," Simon told him.

That was the first I'd heard about it. "You mean you want to stay here a second night?" I asked when we were alone.

"Perhaps, my friend. There are interesting developments here."

"Next thing you'll be telling me that concentrated psychic waves can cause radiation burns on people. Or that the Mafia is trying to move in on the spiritualism business."

"I would never say that. Mrs. Tolliver's daughter has admitted that her mother's séances are fraudulent. If the other residents also lack true psychic abilities, we must look elsewhere for the source of the town's problems."

Later, when we drove back through Harker Mews, we saw that it was quite different from the previous day. Now there were little groups of residents everywhere, talking about the killing, and not a customer in sight. We spent the afternoon driving around on the back roads surrounding the town. Occasionally Simon would add a line or notation to a rough map he was sketching, and twice we stopped to speak with farmers working in their fields. Had they noticed any unusual nighttime activity recently? They hadn't. It was very quiet at night. Simon would get back into the car and cross out one of the routes on the map he'd sketched. After a time he seemed to focus on one particular area south of town, and we stopped at a dirt lane with a sign reading *Road Closed*. He got out and examined some tire tracks in the dust.

"So what have we discovered?" I asked him when we paused for a bite to eat at a truck stop outside of town.

"Perhaps the secret of Harker Mews. I am lacking only one piece of information." He'd unfolded his map and was studying it again.

Before I could ask what it was, a voice said, "Hello! We meet again." I looked up and saw Sylvia Tolliver's neighbor, Matt Maitland, coming to join us. I slid over in the booth to make room for him. "We've almost got enough for another séance," I observed.

"Sylvia is still upset about yesterday, but she'll get over it. We've all got other things to think of today."

"Her daughter is still staying with her?" Simon asked.

Maitland nodded. "For another night. We're having a meeting tonight about the killing, and they're coming to it."

Simon Ark frowned, as if deep in thought. "Mr. Maitland, perhaps you could help me with something. My friend and I have been researching this area, and we've talked to some of the farmers today. I drew this map showing the town, along with some of the dirt roads leading off to farms and vineyards."

Maitland nodded. "It's great wine country around here."

Simon's bony finger jabbed at the map. "This wooded area south of town. Do you know who owns it?"

Maitland squinted at the lines. "I have to orient myself." He gave the map a half-turn. "Oh! Beyond Brewster's farm! A company bought that land after the mine closed, but they never developed it. I forget the name—I think it was Bexel Container Corporation, something like that. We figured they'd bring in some jobs but they never did. That was when most of the young people like Sylvia's daughter decided to move elsewhere." He snapped his fingers. "Containment, that's it! Bexel Containment Corporation."

Simon Ark smiled. "We'll be at the meeting tonight."

Though there were only a few dozen people at the town meeting they almost filled the tiny church by the crossroads. Other than Mrs. Tolliver and her daughter, and Matt Maitland, there was no one we knew. Someone suggested they get Sam Gates to close up the store for a half-hour so he could attend, and one of the men ran across the street to tell him. As he was arriving Sergeant Myers strode in too, making for the pulpit. We were seated in front of Beth Tolliver and she leaned over to tell me the church had been closed because all the Methodists were gone. I supposed that Myers made as good a minister as anyone.

"First," he began, "I want to assure you the state police and the Chautauqua sheriff's office have launched a full investigation into the killing of Joseph Caldwell in Harker Mews last night. The U.S. Postal Service authorities are also investigating, though at this point there is no reason to believe that delivery of the mail has been compromised in any manner."

A woman raised her hand to ask, "Was the killing drug-related?"

"We have no evidence of that at this time."

"Do you think a local resident is involved?" an elderly lady asked.

"Sorry, I don't know that either."

I leaned over and whispered to Simon, "They have a lot of questions for a town full of psychics."

Behind us, Sylvia Tolliver called out, "We came here to get some answers." Others echoed her sentiments.

Myers held up his hands to quiet them. "Look, if anyone knows anything about this, I'm appealing for information. Did any of you see or hear anything?"

That was when Simon Ark put up his hand. "I may be able to help," he said, rising from his seat.

The detective eyed him quizzically as Simon came up to join him at the pulpit. "Can you contribute to our investigation, Mr. Ark?"

"I can do better than that, sir. I can tell you the frightening thing that happens in Harker Mews after dark."

"And what is that?"

"I believe a company called Bexel Containment Corporation is illegally burying radioactive waste in the old salt mine beyond the Brewster farm."

During the commotion that followed, Simon whispered something to Myers before continuing. The sergeant left his side and moved toward the back of the room.

"My friend and I found the body of Joe Caldwell right outside here, in the middle of the street, shortly after eleven o'clock last night. There was no other traffic about, but on the way into town we'd passed a large truck. I think most of you who are familiar with the roads around here will realize, as we did, that the truck almost certainly had to pass this same intersection, whether it was driving straight through or turning. The intersection is illuminated by a night light from the convenience store. Yet the driver did not stop or call in a report of a body. My first thought was that the truck had hit Joe Caldwell and kept on going, but when closer examination revealed a bullet wound I was left with the strong suspicion that the truck had dropped the body there as it passed through. Sergeant Myers pretty much confirmed it through examination of bloodstains. Caldwell was killed an hour or so earlier and dumped where we found him.

"Where was he killed? Under his fingernails and on the bottoms of his shoes Joe had white crystals that tasted like salt. I remembered mention of a salt mine that had closed, and this afternoon, while examining the dirt road to the old mine, I noticed the recent tracks of trucks. Something was being brought to the abandoned salt mine, or taken from it, under cover of darkness. That was the real reason people were warned away from here after dark—so they wouldn't become suspicious of the trucks. Caldwell, whose

suspensions were aroused, sneaked into the mine and was discovered and killed.

"What was the secret of the mine? I knew abandoned salt mines were sometimes considered for the storage of radioactive waste, and when I learned the cause of Elmer Aldrich's death last month I had the answer. Some sort of accident or overexposure to the radioactive material he was carrying caused the truck driver's death. I learned that a company called Bexel Containment Corporation had purchased the mine property, and the word *Containment* set off more alarms. It's generally used these days in connection with nuclear power plants and radioactivity. In many parts of the country power plants, hospitals, and research facilities have been forced to store nuclear waste on site because no central storage facilities are available. Illegal operators like Bexel offer to dispose of the waste materials with no questions asked."

Sergeant Myers asked a question from the back of the room. "Who killed Joe Caldwell?"

"The company was making a fortune from this illegal disposal, of course, but they had to have someone on the scene watching out for trouble. Most people knew nothing of the dumping, but even in a town as eccentric as Harker Mews, somebody might notice the nighttime trucks and become suspicious, just as Caldwell did. I can't say with certainty that this company person pulled the trigger but it seems likely." He raised his voice, targeting young Sam Gates. "Sam, you told us you heard a shot, but there was none at the intersection. Caldwell was killed an hour earlier at the mine. You told us you were just closing up, but you would have closed more than an hour earlier, at ten o'clock. And when we followed you into your store to phone the state police, I noticed the dusty footprints you left, just like the salt on the bottom of Caldwell's shoes. You were there when he was killed at the mine, weren't you? And you rode the truck back into town to help dump the body."

Sam Gates went for his gun then, but Simon had whispered a warning to Sergeant Myers in advance. Myers knocked the weapon from his hand and had him cuffed in seconds.

It was a big story after that, with Bexel Containment indicted on more than thirty counts of conspiracy, illegal dumping, and environmental damage. Sam Gates pleaded guilty to the murder charge and testified against the company in return for a reduced sentence.

Through it all, Simon Ark's name was never mentioned. Perhaps the press thought he was simply one more resident of this strange town where no one ever stayed over. ●

REASONABLE DOUBTS

by Stephen F. Wilcox

Randall Montayne scanned the front page of the morning paper spread out on the breakfast table and made little clicking noises at the back of his throat. Without looking up, he held out his coffee cup for a refill.

Maria, the housekeeper, padded gently across the kitchen's terra cotta floor and filled his cup, her eyes caught by the paper's lead item—an excuse for her to bring up their running debate.

“Ay, there, see?” She reached around Montayne's narrow shoulders and stabbed at the short bold headline:

Samaritan Strikes Again

“Look, señor, you see? Five different churches, including St. Christopher's. Thousands of dollars stuffed into the poor boxes.” She smiled down at Montayne. “It is as I tol' you before, there is much good in this world, no?”

Montayne skimmed the item rapidly, his irritation building. It wasn't Maria's question so much as what it implied that grated on him. That everything could be neatly categorized into black and white, good and evil. And that as the city's most prominent defense attorney, Montayne, in his dealings with accused criminals, was de facto one of the evil ones. Never mind that he paid his housekeeper a wage well above average and gave her most weekends off. She was part of the great unwashed public, unable or unwilling to comprehend the complexities of

Rochester, New York resident Stephen Wilcox is a former newspaper reporter. He joins *EQMM* for the first time this month with a tale of conscience involving a lawyer made prosperous by the defence of vicious criminals. With more than a half-dozen novels to his credit (from St. Martin's Press) Mr. Wilcox is by no means a newcomer to the mystery field, but we congratulate him on an entertaining debut for *EQMM*. †

the legal system and his own crucial role in it.

"Did it ever occur to you," he said, placing the coffee cup on the table, "that your 'Good Samaritan' may have ulterior motives for his largess?"

"What does this mean, ulterior motives?" Maria struggled with the anglo vowel sounds.

"Well—a guilty conscience, perhaps. Something that compels him to hand out tens of thousands of dollars to the local churches as a means of appeasing God for his transgressions."

"Why can't he be just a good man who wishes to help the poor?" Maria bunched her shoulders. "A Christian man. Not like those who do such things as—" She pointed to the story Montayne had been about to read before she interrupted him. "—as this business, this terrible murder of a young woman and her children. *Madre de Dios*." She reflexively made the sign of the cross. "When the police find the killer, they should shoot him down in the street. Destroy this loco like a sick dog."

"And what of the presumption of innocence?" Montayne countered. "In this country one must be proven guilty beyond a reasonable doubt, Maria. To protect the innocent against the trampling of their rights—"

"To protect the rights of the killers and the rapists, it seems to me," the woman sniffed. "Some bigshot lawyer always twisting things around until . . ." Her copper skin darkened further as her words trailed off, and she shrank back from the table. "I'm sorry, Señor Montayne. I did not mean . . . I think I talk too much."

"*De nada*," Montayne shrugged off the insult. It wasn't anything he hadn't heard time and time again, most often from his ex-wife—although her low opinion of his legal specialty hadn't persuaded her to forego the monthly support checks he was obligated to send. Maria, at least, knew how to brew a decent cup of coffee.

He smiled up at her. "Tell you what. If your Good Samaritan does turn out to be a repentant axe murderer, I promise to represent him in court. Pro bono, if necessary."

Montayne's secretary handed him a phone message as he came into the reception area of the lavish offices he rented in one of the city's more prestigious high rises.

"A prospective client," Miss Tanner said lightly, careful to keep her tone neutral. "The police picked him up this morning and charged him in that triple murder last night. The Ortega woman

and her two children. Two little girls, ages four and seven," she couldn't help adding.

Montayne looked at the name on the message. Ralph Hendricks. No bells went off, but then, even the city's top defense lawyer couldn't be expected to recognize the name of every criminal in town.

Alleged criminal, Montayne reminded himself as he nodded absently to Miss Tanner and made for his private office.

Montayne stared across the spartan trestle table at Ralph Hendricks, then glanced down at the folder spread open before him.

"I doubt if the judge will grant bail, Mr. Hendricks," he said. "You have a rather intimidating record. Eighteen arrests, two convictions. Everything from intent to sell controlled substances to breaking and entering and attempted murder. To put it mildly, the court considers you a bad risk for bail."

"Bad risk? Hey, man, I was born in this city. I got all my business connections here, un'nerstand what I'm sayin'? I ain't goin' no place. 'Sides—" He smiled slyly. "They can't prove nothin' on me. I got a alibi tighter than a bug's ass. I was way 'cross town when the Ortega bitch bought it, and I got a couple of ladies who'll swear to it."

For a long moment, Montayne stared placidly at his would-be client. Then: "Let's be frank, Mr. Hendricks. The police didn't pick your name out of a hat. It's known that you and the husband of the dead woman were, uh, rivals. The police allege that Ortega has been undercutting you in the local drug scene since arriving from South America last year, costing you hundreds of thousands of dollars. Also, the police have found a witness who claims to have seen you enter the Ortegas' apartment building last night."

"That's bull, man. Nobody coulda seen me . . ." He caught himself with a snorted chuckle, then glanced around the county jail's empty interview room. "This is between you and me, right? I mean, legalwise?"

"Anything you tell me is privileged, Mr. Hendricks. Like talking to a priest in a confessional."

"Right. Anyway—" He did one more quick survey of the room before continuing. "The lobby of the place was empty and so was the elevator, okay? And I left by the fire stairs. Nobody could've seen me."

"Well," Montayne said drily, "that answers my first question: Did you commit the crime? Now I have only two others." He again concentrated on the other man's face before asking, "Why?"

"Why? Whaddya mean 'why'?"

"Why did you kill the woman and her children?" Montayne asked dispassionately. "They had nothing to do with Ortega's drug operation. What did you have to gain from their deaths?"

Hendricks's eyes narrowed to slits. "A lesson, man, in a language Ortega understands. That's the way those Colombians operate themselves, see? Just to show the competition how crazy they are, how they don't care about nothin'. So, when I heard Ortega was outa the country settin' up a big buy, I figured, hey, why not give him a taste of his own medicine?" He took a drag on the Kool that had been smoldering in his hand since the interview began. "You mess with me, man, you get hurt. Ortega, he just found that out. In spades."

"I see."

"So what else you wanna know? You said you had two more questions."

"So I did." Montayne pushed himself up in his chair and leaned forward. "There is the question of my fee. Are you able to pay it? You asked for the best, Mr. Hendricks, and the best doesn't come cheap."

"Tell me about it." The other man laughed. "You remember Tony Calli, you got him off that murder/extortion rap about two years ago, after everybody else figured he was set to go up for life?"

Montayne nodded.

"Yeah, well, me and Tony were tight. I followed that case real close and I seen you were the best. The way you suckered that jury." Hendricks shook his head in admiration.

"I'll require an advance fee of fifty thousand dollars," Montayne said, unmoved by the testimonial. "Certified check or bank draft."

Hendricks didn't bat an eye at the figure. "No problem, counselor." He grinned. "I been puttin' a little petty cash aside, just in case a rainy day came along."

"Fine." Montayne gathered up the file folder and began to rise. "In that case, I'll begin—"

"One more thing, man." Hendricks waved him back down into the chair. "Like I said, I knew Tony Calli pretty good. Before the trial, he told me you and him had a little contingency plan set up, y'know? Sorta your own witness protection and relocation program, like the feds do? Got him some new ID, a passport and all. Set up a way he could get outa the country unnoticed, so he didn't

have to worry 'bout the feds comin' back at him with RICO charges after you got him off the local rap."

"I may have made a few arrangements for Mr. Calli," Montayne said, toying with his fountain pen.

"Yeah, well, I might want you to make a few for me, too."

"But I thought you were committed to this city, Mr. Hendricks. Your business contacts and clients—"

"I wouldn't want to relocate, like, permanently," the drug peddler interrupted. For the first time, Montayne thought he could detect a note of fear in the man's voice. "It's just, you know, Ortega, he's gonna look to get back at me once I'm back on the street. I gotta get a read on the situation, un'erstand? If my people can handle him before I get off, there's no problem. If they can't, I'll need to leave the country pronto, right after the trial. Once the situation is back in control, I'll be back." He ground the cigarette into the cheap tin ashtray supplied by the county. "I'd pay you good to make the arrangements, if it turns out I need to lay low."

"We'll discuss it when the time comes," Montayne said, rising again. He picked up his briefcase and started to leave, then turned back to his client.

"One thing, Mr. Hendricks," he said softly. "My original fee pays me to represent you on the charges, that's all. Should you need me to arrange a . . . leave of absence after the trial, I would require a second payment of fifty thousand dollars. In cash, this time."

"No sweat, man." Hendricks smiled. "You set it up right for me and I'll see you get yours."

The state's case against Ralph Hendricks was a tissue-thin weave of hearsay, innuendo, and inconclusive forensic testimony, all of which would be worthless to the prosecutors if not for one other ingredient: the key witness, Eddie Dumont, the night security guard at the Ortegas' building. It was on this man's sworn statement—that he saw Ralph Hendricks enter an elevator in the main lobby of the apartment building on the night of the brutal murders—that the prosecution's case hinged.

No one appreciated that fact more than Randall Montayne. Which is why he hired a private investigator to dig into Eddie Dumont's life, past and present.

Montayne sat behind his massive cherry desk on the eve of the trial, reviewing his investigator's report on Dumont. As he

scanned the pages, he began to hum, satisfied. Perhaps now his client would show a little more faith in him.

Hendricks had become difficult to deal with in the weeks leading up to the trial, becoming more agitated and abrasive with each passing day spent in a county jail cell. First there had been Montayne's failure to sway the judge into granting bail; understandable given Hendricks's past record and the heinous nature of the charges pending against him. Then there had been the rumors, passed to Hendricks in his cell by his cohorts on the outside. How Ortega had gone underground. How the word was out that, despite the outcome of the trial, Hendricks was a marked man.

"It don't bother me, man," the drug pusher had insisted during a recent interview at the jail. "Once I'm outa here, all I need is a little down time somewhere—someplace warm, like the Bahamas'd be good. Give Ortega time to let his guard down, get sloppy. Then I come back, call in a few favors, and that greaser is history."

"What you do about Mr. Ortega is your business," Montayne had said. "I'm here to provide you with a legal defense."

"You're here to get me sprung, man," Hendricks hissed, slapping his palm flat against the tabletop. "I can't afford to do any time upstate. Too easy for the Colombian to have me whacked."

"I'm doing all I can—"

"Yeah, well, you better do more than you did at the bail hearing, Montayne. Remember, you get another fifty grand just for making a few travel arrangements. But only if I beat the charges."

"The state's case is very weak," Montayne had assured his client. "Except for the security guard, Dumont, there's very little hard evidence to . . ."

"Maybe I should arrange to have this rent-a-cop have an accident." A predatory smile eased onto Hendricks's angular face. "It'd cost me, but when you know the right people—you can get anything done for a price, huh, Montayne?"

"I told you before, Mr. Hendricks, there's no need for any preemptive action against Eddie Dumont. I'll take care of him myself when I get him on the witness stand."

Now, seated in his private study, Montayne reviewed the investigator's report on Dumont for a third time and muttered, "Yes, yes. I think I can handle our Mr. Dumont quite nicely, thank you."

Montayne, his thumbs hooked into the watch pockets in his vest, stared across the courtroom at the witness in the dock and smiled thinly.

"Now, then, Mr. Dumont, let me see if I understand the testimony you've given for the prosecution," he said, his tone unflinchingly courteous. "On the night of the murders of Mrs. Ortega and her children, you claim that you were just returning to your post at the lobby security desk when you saw a man step into an elevator. And you've identified my client, Mr. Hendricks, as being the man you saw."

"That's right." Dumont's head bobbed earnestly as he glanced over at the attentive jury. "I seen 'im, all right."

Montayne studied the stocky, middle-aged security guard a few moments, letting him stew in the silence, letting the members of the jury observe the man's nervous fidgeting, the ill-fitting suit and garish tie, the puffy bags under the eyes, and the large, heavily veined nose.

"And just where were you returning from, Mr. Dumont?" Montayne said finally, his voice still dangerously soft.

"Pardon?"

"I asked where you were returning from. When you allegedly saw my client enter the elevator." Slowly now, Montayne moved from behind the defense table to a spot near the jury box, an arm's length from where the foreman was seated. The angle was perfect. Now the jury had a full view of the witness's face—a face only a mother could love.

"Well, uh, I was coming back from the head. The bathroom," Dumont stumbled over the words.

"I see." Montayne said. "The only guard in the lobby of a security building, and you just get up and leave your post as the mood strikes you?"

"It wasn't my mood that was striking me, more like my bladder," Dumont said sheepishly, then grinned at the titters of laughter from the jury box and the public gallery. "See, I don't do it too much—leave my post, I mean. But when a fella's gotta go, he's gotta go."

"You're sure it wasn't something else that was calling to you, Mr. Dumont?" Montayne raised his voice a few decibels, adding a dash of scepticism. "A bottle, perhaps?"

Dumont's face dropped as he looked quickly from Montayne to the jury and back again. "No, uh-uh. I had to use the head, that's all it was."

Quiet again, his voice laced with sympathy, Montayne said, "You've had a drinking problem for quite some time, haven't you,

Mr. Dumont? Lost several jobs because of your drinking, isn't that so?"

"That was before," the sweating guard snapped. "I was—I mean, I *am* an alcoholic, okay? It's a disease. I go to regular meetings of A.A. now and I don't drink no more."

"You say you go to meetings of Alcoholics Anonymous on a regular basis? How regular is that?"

"Couple of times a week, usually," Dumont said warily. "On Tuesdays and Thursdays. Sometimes on Saturday, if I'm having—you know—problems staying off the stuff."

"A couple of times a week." Montayne nodded somberly. "And yet my investigation shows that, in the week leading up to the Ortega murders, you failed to appear at any of the meetings held by your local A.A. chapter. Why was that, Mr. Dumont? Surely you weren't in the head all that time?"

This time the trill of courtroom laughter was all on Montayne's side. Flushed, Dumont stuttered, "N-n-no, nothing l-like that. It's just, I dunno, I f-f-felt like I was doing okay and I had other things to do those nights, so I skipped a couple of meetings, that's all."

Now Montayne began his practiced pace, moving quickly back and forth in the open area in front of the jury box, forcing Dumont to follow him with his eyes. Shifting, shifty eyes.

"Perhaps you had another reason for missing those meetings, Mr. Dumont," he suggested as he paced. "Perhaps you slipped a little bit. Back into the bottle, sir. And perhaps that night at the apartment building, you left your post not because of a call from Mother Nature, but because Old Granddad was beckoning. Isn't that more like it, Dumont?"

Before the prosecutor could raise an objection to Montayne's badgering, the hapless security guard bellowed a denial. "N-n-no! I wasn't drinking that night! I don't do that no more—"

"Oh, you don't?" Montayne stopped moving and stared hard at the witness. "Are you certain of that, Dumont? Or should I call to the stand the building's janitor, a Mr. Stefan Bruel, to tell us how many times you and he have shared a bottle? Should I do that, sir?"

Reasonable doubt.

That was all it took; all it ever took. Plant a few tiny seeds in the minds of the jurors. Cultivate, nurture those seeds and watch them grow into half-formed questions, then scepticism, and then an acquittal.

Dumont had folded up like a cheap lawn chair caught in a gale, as Montayne knew he would. An uneducated man in a minimum-wage job, a boozier—reformed or not—brought into a courtroom packed with strange faces, forced to withstand a soul-baring cross-examination from a highly trained, widely experienced criminal attorney. It was no contest.

It didn't matter that, to the end, Dumont insisted he hadn't had a drink that night. Montayne, after all, didn't need to prove that the security guard *had* been drinking. Only that, given his background and character and employment history, he *might* have been drinking. And, therefore, could have misidentified Ralph Hendricks as the man he saw entering an elevator in the lobby.

Not guilty.

Ralph Hendricks, arm in arm with the city's finest criminal defense attorney, walked out of the courtroom a free man. And into the arms of the gathered media, their mini-cams whirring, microphones thrust forward, strident voices screeching.

"Mr. Hendricks, if you could comment on the jury's decision for a . . ."

"Was there ever any doubt in your mind, Mr. Hendricks, that you'd be . . ."

"Mr. Hendricks, what about the D.A.'s assertion that you . . ."

Montayne, shepherding his client deftly through the wolf pack, fixed his mouth into his best TV smile and repeated, "My client has no comment at this time. Thank you, ladies and gentlemen, but Mr. Hendricks has nothing to say."

"What about you, Mr. Montayne? There are those who say your methods—your courtroom style—amounts to simple manipulation. Distortions of the law. Would you care to comment on that?" The questioner was a young, intense courts reporter for the city's major daily. He held a mini tape recorder a few inches from Montayne's face and said, "How about it, Montayne. Has justice been served here today?"

Montayne nudged Hendricks onto the waiting elevator, then turned to the newspaperman. "The system has triumphed here today—the system." He stepped back into the elevator and, as the doors slowly closed, added, "That's something you and your readers seem unable to grasp."

"How much farther, man?"

"The turnoff is just ahead, then another two miles to the cabin."

"I don't know why you couldn't find a place closer to the city, especially for what I'm payin' you."

"You asked for the same service I provided Tony Calli." Montayne glanced over from behind the steering wheel. "A couple of days in seclusion, a new passport, and plane tickets out of the country. This fishing cabin of mine is perfect. No neighbors to come prying. And on Thursday, a seaplane will land on the lake and take you north to another lake, in Canada. No customs checks for you. You'll be driven straight to Toronto International Airport and put on a flight to the Bahamas, as you requested. It's a perfect arrangement."

"You sure you got the new ID and tickets ready?"

"Are you sure that bag you're carrying contains fifty thousand dollars?" Montayne countered.

Hendricks reached into the vinyl gym bag one of his minions had passed him when Hendricks and Montayne had exited the courthouse. "What's this look like?" He smiled, holding up a thick packet of hundred-dollar bills.

Montayne, satisfied, patted the left breast pocket of his chalk-striped suitcoat. "I have your complete itinerary right here." A few minutes later, he nosed the Mercedes up a steep gravel drive surrounded by pines and sugar maples and pulled to a stop in front of a modern A-frame cabin.

"Right this way." He hoisted a suitcase from the car's trunk and headed for the front door.

"Not too shabby," Hendricks grunted when the two men had stepped into the rustic living room of the house. "So nobody knows about this place? Just you?"

"Just me. It's my own private little universe, far from the tumult and turmoil of the city." Not even his ex-wife knew about it, Montayne realized, smiling slightly at the thought. The cabin was only one of several assets he'd managed to keep hidden from her lawyer during the divorce settlement. He carried the suitcase toward the bedroom. "Now, while I put your things away, why don't you stack the money there on the table for me. I think it's always best to get financial considerations out of the way up front."

"Yeah. I noticed that." Hendricks grinned as the attorney continued into the bedroom. "But that's cool," he called out, as his hand reached into the vinyl bag, fished through the bundles of cash, and found the familiar textured grip of a nine-millimeter pistol. He was just bringing it out of the bag when he heard Mon-

Montayne reentered the living room behind him. He began to turn, keeping the pistol at his side, keeping his voice casual—"Business is business, like they say."—but the other man's voice, sudden and commanding, froze him in place.

"Don't try it, Hendricks." Montayne was holding a twelve-gauge shotgun, aimed at the other man's midsection. "Drop the gun back into the bag."

Hendricks hesitated, then did as instructed. "Hey, man, I only—"

"You only wanted to kill me and save yourself fifty thousand dollars," Montayne said quietly. "I should thank you; it makes things easier." He wagged the shotgun. "Let's go. We're taking a little hike."

"Listen, Montayne—"

Montayne took a step closer and prodded the drug pusher with the barrel. "Move."

Five minutes later, up a brush-entangled slope to a small clearing in the trees, the men came to a halt in front of an open hole in the ground.

"You wanted to escape just like your friend Calli, Hendricks?" Montayne said, his voice ragged. "This is the place. He's buried here, along with a few more pieces of scum."

"Please, Mr. Montayne!" Hendricks whirled around. "You can't do this! You're my lawyer, for Christ—!"

"Not anymore," Montayne said, but the words were obliterated by the concussive explosion of the shotgun, the blast rippling away in shock waves and dying out in the empty forest.

Montayne lit a candle, knelt in the pre-dawn semidarkness of the place, and bowed his head.

"Please understand," he murmured. "We must preserve the system to protect the innocent, even if that means the guilty sometimes go free. As an attorney, I know that better than anyone, Lord, and I do my best for my clients. But afterward . . . *sweet Jesus, I'm only human.*"

After a time, Montayne rose awkwardly, walked slowly down the long center aisle, and paused before the donations box. He reached inside his coat, took out a packet of bills—ten thousand dollars—and stuffed it through the slot, then glanced at his watch. Five A.M., and still four more churches to visit before dawn. But he needn't hurry, he reminded himself as he exited through St. Christopher's huge oak batten doors. He had long since learned the way. ●

Mr. Eames, the butler, put up his hand in rebuke. This was becoming unseemly.

"Let's have no more of this squabbling. If it was murder we shall be informed in the Family's good time. I wouldn't be surprised if Ethel isn't entirely wrong about the cause of death and the poor lady did it herself."

"What, after a night of passionate love?" asked the irrepressible Ethel.

"There's been nights of passionate love in this house that have left the lovers more depressed than ecstatic," said Thomas, who found the neurotic sex lives of some of his betters incomprehensible. "Anyway, what call have you to say that Mrs. Heatherington-Scott had had one?"

"I know her. She's been here before. Always insists on a room to herself with a lock on the door."

"She'd no call to mention that," said Mrs. Cornforth. "All the bedrooms in this house have locks."

"Course they do. The Prince of Wales used to visit."

"The old Prince of Wales," said Eames pedantically. "The last but two—King Teddy as he became. You're too young to remember, my girl."

"But I've heard the stories! Anyway, there she was in her own room, and no call if she didn't want to open the door to anyone, not even her husband."

"Especially not her husband," said Thomas.

"But the fact is, she did. And the question is, who to?"

"If she did," said Cook heavily. Everything about Cook was heavy, except her hand with pastry. "I've heard no hevidence so far that the poor lady did."

That Yorkshire's Robert Barnard should pen a classic English detective story employing one of the genre's most illustrious sleuths is not at all surprising, for he is an expert on Golden Age mystery writers and has written a book about Agatha Christie's work entitled *A Talent to Deceive*. He is also the author of many witty short stories and novels under both his own name and the pseudonym Bernard Bastable, the latest of which is *Too Many Notes, Mr. Mozart* (Carrroll & Graf '96).†

"I did her room when she was here last year," said Mary, the second housemaid, and Ethel's great ally. "Going by form, she'll have had someone in there with her."

"There'd been two heads on those pillows," agreed Ethel, "and two bodies between those sheets, however hard they tried to disguise it."

"You noticed a lot before you ran screaming down the corridor," said Thomas spitefully.

"I noticed first and then I ran screaming. I thought it would be expected of me. Anyway, the forensic scientists will be able to confirm she had someone in with her. Brilliantine leaves traces."

"Oh ho!" said Thomas. "Lord Heptonstall, you mean!"

"He uses lots of it," agreed Ethel. "But all the men use some."

"I don't know what's got into you, young lady," tut-tutted Cook. "You read too many of them detective stories."

"Well, they're more educational than *Lucky Star* or *True Romance*, Mrs. Cornforth." Ethel thought for a minute. "I hope the police notice the mud."

"Mud?"

"A bit of hard mud, very light-coloured, by the bed."

This had them all looking at each other.

"I didn't leave no mud when I cleaned the floor yesterday," said Mary.

"She could have left it herself," said Mrs. Cornforth.

"When she never went outdoors yesterday?" asked Ethel. "Or if she did, it was no farther than the grounds. Too busy making a dead set at young Mr. Merrivale. Anyway, that wasn't Frensham earth I saw, not local."

"Sir William took some of the gentlemen shooting yesterday," Thomas pointed out. Thomas had now got over his pique and was thoroughly caught up. This was too good a thing to be distracted from by pique.

"So he did, Thomas," said Ethel. "Harpington way. Has anybody cleaned any boots today?"

"Light mud," said Bob, the odd-job boy, relishing his moment of glory. Usually he was much put down. "Sort of clay-y like."

They all looked at each other.

"Which side of the bed was it, the piece you found?" asked Eames.

"The far side. Where the bedside table is. The side she slept on."

"And where the window is," said Thomas. "And she's a lady who always sleeps—slept—with her window open."

"Was the door locked when you went up this morning?" asked Mary.

"Of course it was. Otherwise whoever it was would probably have come in from the corridor. I used my house key, the same as I did yesterday. Hers was on the floor by the bedside table—she'd probably knocked it off when she had a glass of water, when she took the Veronal."

"That Veronal must be strong," said Mary. "Otherwise she'd have surely woken up, with someone coming in through her window."

"Not her," said Thomas. "She was drinking and dancing till two or half past. Not just last night either, but the night before as well."

"When I took the tray in yesterday morning," said Ethel, "she didn't register a thing."

"Well, she certainly didn't today," said Thomas. "So what you reckon is, she had her boyfriend in, and after he left someone climbed in the window and smothered her in her sleep?"

"That's right. She'd have been too far gone to hear. She always was. I had orders not to take in tea until half-past ten."

"The gentleman who'd been in with her would naturally have gone back to his room well before people started stirring."

"Particularly if he was a married gentleman."

"Particularly," agreed Thomas, "if he was a married gentleman. The question is, what do we do now?"

"Draw up a list of suspects," said Ethel promptly. "Drat that bell."

"Thomas will see to it," said Mr. Eames, who was beginning to enjoy himself. "Is lunch under way, Mrs. Cornforth?"

"Everything under control," said Cook, "in spite of interruptions and hupsets." She looked at Ethel, who had secured a notebook and pencil. "I suppose we're all on this list of suspects?"

Ethel shook her head regretfully.

"No. It would have been lovely, but it couldn't really be one of us, could it? She's only been here two weekends, and none of us had worked for her in the past. . . . No, it couldn't be one of us."

"She could have seduced Thomas," suggested Mary.

"The idea!" said Mrs. Cornforth. "Mrs. Heatherington-Scott

would never've gone outside her class, and neither would Thomas."

"I'm not so sure about Thomas," said Ethel, "but she'd have stuck to her own circle. An exclusive lady, Mrs. Heatherington-Scott, not to say expensive as well. Anyway, none of us went to Harpington shooting yesterday. Right. So that means the eight ladies and gentlemen sleeping here last night. Top of the list goes the husband, of course."

Ethel, who later in life wrote scripts for *Mrs. Dale's Diary* and *Upstairs, Downstairs*, licked her pencil and wrote in a bold, well-schooled hand: Captain James Heatherington-Scott.

"Why top of the list?" asked Bob.

"Because in a domestic murder the husband or wife is always the obvious suspect. You'll know why if you ever marry."

"Why wait till they are away on a weekend?" asked Mrs. Cornforth. "Why not do it at 'ome?"

"And be even *more* the obvious suspect?" asked Ethel pityingly. "Besides, he may have been driven over the edge by her carryings-on. Because carry on she did. Though if you ask me he's a nasty piece of work who wouldn't bat an eyelid whatever she might do. . . . Then there's master and mistress."

She wrote again: Sir William and Lady Warboys. When Cook once more expanded her bosom to protest, Mr. Eames put up his hand.

"No, Mrs. C. We must be scientific about this. All must be equally under suspicion, though we all know the master or mistress would never think of doing such a thing."

"Anyone any idea why the master and mistress ask the Heatherington-Scotts?" asked Ethel. "They're a good twenty years younger, and they've only known them a year or two. Yet this is twice they've been here—first last spring, and now the New Year party."

"I heard the master say that they were fun," said Mr. Eames. "He likes young people with a lot of life in them. Not that he'd ever for a moment think of . . . taking advantage, so to speak, of a young woman of loose morals like Mrs. Heatherington-Scott."

There was a brief moment of silence before Ethel spoke again. Ethel knew a lot more about what the master would and would not think of doing to a young woman than Mr. Eames did.

"Then there's Colonel and Mrs. Swanton. I should think we're all agreed about them."

"A nice gentleman," said Mary. "Always courteous, never too demanding, and generous with it. His lady's a bit more fussy, but a real lady nonetheless."

"Right," said Ethel. "A thoroughly suspicious pair, if you went by detective stories. Then there's Lord and Lady Heptonstall."

There was another moment's silence.

"I'm not one to speak ill of my betters, as you know," said Mrs. Cornforth, "but her Ladyship's remarks within Thomas's hearing about my profiteroles angels would not forgive!"

"Mean, cross, nasty-tongued bitch, and his Lordship is if anything worse," agreed Mr. Eames. "Mind you, it's the first time they've been here, and if I'm any judge it'll be the last. Sir William and her Ladyship have been noticing things, I can tell you."

"Then there's Mr. Merrivale," said Ethel. "Mr. Raymond Merrivale. I don't mind saying I think he's a lovely gentleman!"

"Oh, he is!" said Mary. "It's always 'I wonder if you'd mind' with him—never 'do this, do that' like it is with the Heptonstalls. He's smashing."

"Smashing!" said Cook disparagingly. "What kind of a word is that? I suppose all this henthusiasm has nothing to do with the fact that he's a very handsome young man, has it?"

"Everything," said Ethel. "The old sex urge, and don't run it down, Mrs. Cornforth. Still, he's a married man, and his wife is in her seventh month, from what I hear: That's why she had to send her apologies at the last moment. . . . Well, if you go by character, it'll be the husband or one of the Heptonstalls who did it. But of course you can't just go by character."

"No, you can't!" said Thomas, coming back through the baize door positively pink with self-importance. "You've got to look at *evidence*, that's what you've got to do!"

"All right, out with it," said Ethel. "What's happening upstairs?"

"Upstairs? Bill is ministering to master and mistress and the houseguests, sick as a toad that he's missing all the fun. It's outside that things are happening!"

"Outside? You mean round her window?"

"That's right. Five coppers from Addlesfield, and a French gentleman with moustaches you could uncork a bottle with who's staying with the chief constable. I heard one of the constables say he was a tiptop detective from London."

"And what was he doing?"

"He was looking at the marks of a ladder just under her win-

dow. He asked me where a ladder like that could be found, and I took him round to the one that hangs on the side of the potting shed. It had earth on one end."

"Be pretty funny if a gardener's ladder *didn't* have earth on it," commented Cook.

"It corresponded!" said Thomas, who was talking in exclamation marks. "They took it over to the rose bed under her window and the marks corresponded. And there was more of that earth there."

"Why did he talk to you about that anyway?" demanded Ethel. "I'd've thought he'd've talked to the gardeners."

"He wanted to talk to me anyway, the French gentleman," said Thomas, oozing conceit. "He said he could see I was a young man with all his wits about him."

Ethel's silent opinion was that Thomas's strong point lay much lower down than his brain. She said: "But he must have had some reason for wanting to talk to you."

"Because I was on last night. That's why Bill is kicking himself. He pulled rank and went to bed at half-past eleven, leaving me on for the late-night drinks. I was the one around just before they all went to bed."

"And?"

"Well, like I told the foreign gentleman, there was dancing in the sitting room, and this Mrs. Heatherington-Scott, she was dancing with Mr. Merrivale."

"Oh—you told him that!" chorused Ethel and Mary.

"'Course I did. You've got to be truthful, like in a court of law. If they are innocent they have nothing to fear, that's what they always say. I told him they danced very intimate-like, with her twiggling his ear and whispering in it, and dancing closer and closer. I was surprised because she'd been throwing herself at him all day and not getting anywhere much."

"And did you tell the foreign gentleman that her husband was going mad with jealousy?"

"No, I didn't, because he wasn't. He was changing the Gramophone records. Same as happened last year with her and Sir Harry Dexter."

"Oh yes, I remember: She had him panting after her all right!"

Mr. Eames was just getting up, convinced that juniors and upstarts were usurping the stage and it was time for him to be where the action was, when he was interrupted by the bell. Soon it was time for luncheon, and the whole of the downstairs staff

was occupied in one way or another. Any conversation there was was snatched in odd moments of repose.

"You were wrong about that foreign gentleman," said Mr. Eames to Thomas in the kitchen between courses. "He's Belgian."

"Same thing."

"It is not the same thing. Don't you remember 'gallant little Belgium' during the war?"

"Mr. Eames, I'm only twenty-three. I was born the year it started."

"Well, we'd never have called France 'gallant,' I can tell you. France and England never pulled together, for all they might find themselves on the same side."

After lunch the Belgian gentleman talked to several of the below-stairs staff and they were severally repelled or enchanted. Bill, the first footman, who had nothing to tell him, said his foot itched to kick him up the b.t.m., while Mary said she felt she was being taken by one of those Continental gigolos to the Strand Corner House, as a preliminary to being seduced.

"You shameless hussy!" said Cook, and thought accordingly worse of the foreign gentleman for arousing such fancies.

It was gone three before they could have another real talking-over of the crime. They pooled the information they had gleaned or guessed from their several interrogations and began in again.

"So far as I can see, it's practically certain Mr. Merrivale was in there with her early on in the night," said Ethel. "They're hardly making a secret of it, and after the exhibition they seem to have made, if Thomas is right, he couldn't deny it."

Mr. Merrivale, clearly, had lost favour.

"I think the foreign gentleman thinks there may be more than one of them in it," said Thomas. "He keeps going on about 'grey cells.'"

"I've never been inside the local police station," said Ethel. "You wouldn't expect them to paint it pretty pink, would you?" She thought, looking dubious. "It doesn't sound likely. Why should there be a conspiracy? Merrivale could have done it on his own when he was in there with her, and the gentleman who came in from outside didn't need a partner either. Now think a bit about this mud." She turned towards Bob. "How many pairs of boots were there this morning?"

Bob blushed at his unaccustomed prominence, but said promptly: "Four, like I told the foreign gentleman."

"The foreign gentleman won't have a notion how things are done below stairs. There may be something he's missed. Whose were they?"

"The master's, Colonel Swanton's (I know because he takes size twelve), Captain Heatherington-Scott's (he had his name in his), and one pair more. I think they were that Lord Something's."

"They were," said Mary. "I found them outside his door when I took master and mistress their early morning tea."

"He may be a lord but he's no gentleman," said Mr. Eames loftily. "We are not an hotel."

"And the other boots would have been just inside the baize door as usual," said Ethel thoughtfully. "Given to one or other of us last night. Anyone could have retrieved his. . . . Still, the fact that Lord Heptonstall had the use of his all night does rather direct the spotlight on him."

"What do you sound like, girl?" said Mrs. Cornforth. "One of those books you read."

"There was one thing I remembered when the foreign gentleman was asking questions," said Mary eagerly. "He was ever so gentle and nice, but sort of piercing—went right through you—"

"That's enough of that, my girl!"

"—well anyway, I remembered the last time she was here this Mrs. Heatherington-Scott made a set at Sir Harry Destry, like Thomas said, and—well, we all know what happened that time, don't we? Anyway, I was dusting in the library on the morning they all left, and I remember Mrs. H.-S. and Sir Harry walking into the library, he was looking very suspicious and upset, and both were talking very low. Well, I slipped out, of course, as mistress likes us to—"

"They expect servants to be invisible, but they expect the work to be done all the same," put in Ethel.

"—anyway, they never saw me, but before I went I heard her say, in a slinky sort of voice. 'It would be a pity if your wife got to know. I believe she's delicate—the nervous type, isn't she?'"

The reaction was gratifying.

"Blackmail!" said Mr. Eames.

"That's what it sounded like," agreed Mary. "A bit of blackmailing on a small scale."

"Well!" said Cook. "To think of someone in that station of life resorting to blackmail!"

"Not unknown," said Mr. Eames sagely. "I could tell you a thing

or two about the Countess of Warwick and letters from King Teddy. Had it directly from Sir Alan Lascelles's valet. If you can blackmail the R. F. . . . !"

"Anyway," said Thomas, "this really puts Mr. Merrivale back in the spotlight, doesn't it? If she started to put pressure on . . ."

"Ah, but she wouldn't have, would she?" said Ethel. "Not till just before they all left. She'd have let him get in as deep as possible and *then* started the pressure. . . . Not that I've any time for *him* any longer—going on like that when his poor wife was near her time."

"That's exactly the time many gentlemen *do* go astray," said Bill. "I believe when Teddy was acting the goat in this house the Princess of Wales was carrying Queen Maud of Norway as she now is."

"I think you'll find," said Mr. Eames, "that King Teddy acted the goat pretty well irrespective."

"Did I hear something," said Cook frowning, "about Lady Destry having been ill?"

Mr. Eames was thunderstruck.

"You're right! It had gone completely out of my mind. I heard last summer that she'd . . . This needs to be looked into. I shall telephone Sir Harry's butler."

"You never would, Mr. Eames," said Mary admiringly. "That's two counties away!"

"Desperate situations call for desperate measures," said Mr. Eames grandly. But as he departed for the pantry the bell rang for afternoon tea to be served. It was five o'clock before they could hear the results of his conversation.

"Terrible," he told them—and to be fair it was entirely without relish that he spoke. "Really shocking. The lady had always been a bit flighty in her mind—nervous, delicate, taking odd fancies. Last summer she had some kind of shock—nobody knows what. Sent her completely overboard. Bouleversed, as they say across the Channel. Confined to an a-s-y-l-u-m. Private, constant attendance, no expense spared. Shocking!"

"Diabolical!" said Mrs. Cornforth. "Mrs. Heatherington-Scott deserved everything she got!"

"The question is, how often she—they, it must be—tried it," said Mary. "Had they been bleeding Colonel Swanton or Lord Heptonstall dry?"

"Or even master?" put in Ethel.

"As far as I can see, only Mr. Merrivale is in the clear," went on Mary. "Even if he had been out shooting, he wouldn't slip into a lady's bedroom in muddy hunting boots."

"I wouldn't wear muddy hunting boots if I was going to climb in through a bedroom window and murder a lady," said Ethel. The words took time to sink in—to herself as much as to the rest. "It's not as though a gentleman would only bring one or two pairs of shoes with him to a house party."

They sat there thinking. Finally it was again Ethel who spoke.

"It was a blind," she said. "That mud was a red herring. It seemed to let Mr. Merrivale out. In fact it could simply have been broken off Lord Heptonstall's boots at any time during the night. The ladder could have been put up against the wall any time of night—"

"Going out by the gun-room window," said Thomas, "which master announced to all of them was faulty, and that was why Rover slept there."

"Very good with dogs, Mr. Merrivale," said Ethel. "Yes, he went out, put the ladder against the wall briefly to leave traces, threw a bit of mud through the window, and the key, and scattered more mud around the rose bed. It was a red herring."

"What do you think really happened?" asked Mary.

"I think she was dead before he left her room. I think they had their fun, she took the Veronal to sleep soundly, then when she was far gone he smothered her."

"But why? You said yourself she wouldn't have begun putting the pressure on yet."

Ethel shook her head in puzzlement, but a gleam had been coming into Eames's eyes.

"I think," he said, "I've been forgetting something." He got up in his stately way and went over to his pantry. He emerged with an old edition of *Burke's Landed Gentry*. It was very dog-eared, for he seldom took up any other book for his own amusement. He thumbed through it till he came to Merrivale.

"Merrivale, Sir John, Knight, father to our young Raymond . . . Married Georgiana, widow of Sir Francis Destry, Bart . . . Let's see: Destry, Sir Francis, deceased 1914, issue: Henry Edward . . . They were step-brothers, Sir Henry and our Mr. Merrivale, with only a year or two's difference in their ages."

"Brought up together, most likely," said Ethel. "It was revenge, revenge pure and simple. Young Mr. Merrivale came here to get

it. I do think he's noble! I expect he hoped to have as little as possible to do with her, but when she made a dead set at him, as she did at all young married men, that was no longer possible. He had to improvise. That was what he came up with. I don't mind saying I don't blame him a bit! I always did say Merrivale was a lovely young man!"

They were pulled up by the bell. It was Mr. Eames's, and in a moment he was back, and as much in a rush as a butler can be. Drinks and snacks were required in the library. Everyone was assembling there—family, houseguests, the chief constable, the Belgian gentleman. For a time there was chaos. Mr. Eames and Bill and Thomas collected trays and glasses, decanters were dusted down, all variety of bottles were sought. When they went up to the study Ethel and Mary waited outside with the little trays of sundries, catching glimpses of the people in the room, all of them nervously talking in high voices. Bill came out swearing, on his way to look for *sirop de cassis*. Mary peeped in to get another look at those wonderful moustaches and said to herself that they were nothing like corkscrews, more like one of those curved oriental swords that would cut right through you.

Finally everyone was served. Bill and Thomas came out, followed by Mr. Eames, who shut the door behind him, but somehow not quite to—a thing never known to happen before. He led Bill firmly to the baize door and down the stairs, never once looking back to see if he was being followed. In the hall Thomas looked at Mary and Mary looked at Ethel.

"Better stay and listen," said Ethel. "Make sure he gets it right." ●



"Oh, I knew it was loaded. I just never dreamt I would hit him."

THE HABIT OF NEGLECT

by Scott Mackay

I wake up alone, with the promising light of a Kipawa morning sneaking through the cottage curtains, and, turning my head, I see that you are already gone, maybe out to the woodshed or to your favorite spot in Pratt Bay, where the walleye are always biting. Oscar rises from his basket on the floor, approaches me with his tail drooping, and whimpers a few times. I give him a pat. I look at the wedding ring you gave me twenty-five years ago. I smile. Such a long time ago...

I don't know where you are. Last night you were here, this morning you are gone. One night. But we both know the Roy Stolf I married has been gone a lot longer than that. With your pillow empty and cold beside me, I know I lost you when the Shepherds first moved in across the lake last August.

I swing my feet out of bed. Where are my slippers, the silk ones with the purple dragons you bought for me two years ago when we went to China? I usually keep them placed neatly by my night table, toe-to-toe and heel-to-heel, but this morning they aren't here, and I can't remember where I've put them. So I go to the closet and get my jogging shoes. I'm too old for jogging. Next month I'll be fifty-five. But I jog. I jog because you jog. I jog because you say it's good for me, and I've always listened to you. You've always known how to look after me.

You usually tell me the night before if you're going to get up

The remarkably diverse Scott Mackay has not only been a past contributor to *EQMM*, he is published often in the literary press of his native Canada, and has won Canada's prestigious Okanagan Short Story Award. He is also the author of a mainstream thriller, several science fiction stories, and a science fiction novel, *Piero's Flower*, to be published by Tor in 1998. †

early and go somewhere. But last night you didn't say a word, left the cottage right after supper and went to your workshop, that small shed just above and behind the cottage. So I honestly have no idea where you've gone, and I'm worried. I walk to my dressing table, take a .5 milligram tablet of Xanax from one of my many pill bottles, pop it into my mouth, and swallow it whole before I can taste its gagging bitterness. You don't like me taking these pills. But my doctor thinks they're a good idea. I find I can be a better wife if I take these pills.

I smear my lips with lipstick and get rid of the worst of my wrinkles with some face cream. In our twenty-five years of marriage, I've never gone to the breakfast table without first putting on my lipstick.

I leave the bedroom and walk down the hall to the living room, my jogging shoes squeaking against the hardwood floor. You say I should lift my feet. But this morning I'm too tired to lift my feet. This morning, every muscle in my body aches. Oscar follows me, occasionally nuzzling my hand.

When I get to the living room I see that the magazine rack has been overturned, and that the magazines are a mess all over the floor. I have no idea how they got that way, but I straighten them up because I know you'll want them neat when you get back from wherever you've gone. I listen to the small waves of Lake Kipawa as they whisper against the rocky shore.

"Roy?" I call, my voice startling Oscar. "Roy, are you here?"

I get no answer. I've tried to be the wife you've always wanted, but sometimes I think I've failed. I knew right from the start that you expected the best from me.

I go through the double doors into the sun room. You might have slept out here last night. You often do. You like to sleep alone these days. But the couch doesn't look as if it's been slept on—the cushions are still puffy and full. Your hat hangs on a hook near the big bay window. Strange. You never go outside without your hat.

I leave the sun room and shuffle to the kitchen, my legs feeling like lead. No, I never resented the diets or the exercise. And I didn't mind all the courses you made me take. I wanted to take pottery, but you made me understand that the best two courses I could take, the ones that would make me happiest, were home decorating and gourmet cooking. And I must confess, no one cooks a beef stroganoff the way I do.

In the kitchen, I put some Swiss almond mocha in the coffee maker and, because it's Wednesday, start making the French toast. You must always have French toast on Wednesday. No other day will do. As I mix the milk and eggs I glance out the window, where I see the Shepherds' cottage across the bay. Lovely couple, you said. We couldn't have had better neighbors. And of course I had to agree.

I carefully sprinkle each piece of French toast with cinnamon before I put them into the frying pan because I know how fussy you are about cinnamon. Oscar stands beside me, whimpers a few times, then lies at my feet; he's so old he no longer has the energy to beg. I never wanted a dog. I never told you that. I place the first two pieces of French toast into the electric frying pan. Oscar was a part of your overwhelming generosity. A downy woodpecker climbs the birch outside the kitchen window. No, I never wanted a dog, especially one that would live to the ripe old age of nineteen. But now that he's here, I like him well enough.

You always have three pieces of French toast, never more, never less. I don't take syrup on mine. I learned long ago that the best way to make you frown on Wednesday morning is to put syrup on my French toast. A size ten. It hasn't been easy. You like slim women. Which is why I can't understand what you see in Lois Shepherd.

I finish my piece of French toast and sit at the kitchen table waiting for you. We used to have breakfast at six-thirty. But since you retired we have it at eight. You are never late, you are never early, you are always punctual; you detest lack of punctuality in others. I was ten minutes late for your retirement party and you still haven't forgiven me. Because of you, I understand the importance of punctuality.

Silly of me to cry when I was late for your retirement party. You said so yourself. But I cried and cried, and finally had to leave the room. I didn't cry when I miscarried that first time. I didn't even cry when I found you with Lois Shepherd out in the woodshed. I don't know why I cried so much at your retirement party. I made a fool of you, and for that I am truly sorry.

Eight o'clock comes and goes. Your French toast is getting cold and your chair remains empty. Where have you gone? You are never late. My Xanax tablet numbs my anxiety. Has something happened to you out on the water?

I rise unsteadily from my chair, go to the bedroom, and pull on a

pair of shorts and a windbreaker. For one panicked moment I think I might call Sheriff Druckman. But I shrug my panic away. You are five minutes late for your French toast, not a catastrophe by normal standards, and even though you have never been late in your life, even though you have always been soothing in your steadiness and predictable in your actions, I decide against phoning Sheriff Druckman. I don't want to make a fool of you yet again.

I go outside and descend the twenty-seven steps to the dock. Our cottage rests on a precarious granite slope, is well isolated from all the other cottages. You once called it the Lonesome Motel. A good name, because it's here at the cottage that I've known most of my loneliness.

Your boat is still tied to the dock. I know you can't be fishing for walleye at your favorite spot in Pratt Bay. I look along the shore, thinking I might find you sitting on one of the rocks with your binoculars pressed to your eyes, looking for mergansers, loons, and mallards. Except for a kingfisher dipping gracefully through the air, the beach is empty.

I walk down the dock and get into the boat. Maybe you've already come and gone. I put my hand against the motor to see if it's still warm, but it's as cold as death. You taught me to drive this boat. You needed someone to drive so you could troll for walleye. I became a master at reading the depth-finder—you possess all the best technical gadgetry for the modern-day angler. I know the underwater topography of Lake Kipawa better than anybody, have navigated the most treacherous shallows and avoided the most harrowing boulders. You had me out here in all kinds of weather, even once when it snowed, and I never complained. You had me out here when the mosquitoes were thick and the black flies vicious, and you always thought I was having fun, despite my nerve-wracking responsibilities as helmswoman. Maybe it's my fault. I should have told you that I would have much preferred sitting inside reading a book.

I climb out of the boat and look once again along the shore. My eyes rest on Kevin's overturned canoe. Our son didn't come up to the cottage this year. I don't know why. It's the perfect summer spot for an eighteen-year-old boy. The bottom of his canoe is coated with dirt, and a spider has built a web between its prow and a nearby pine sapling. You've tried to stop calling him Lucky, but you've called Kevin Lucky for so long you find it hard. You call

him Lucky because he is our only child. There can be no more. Kevin's womb-destroying voyage through the birth canal made sure of that. I know you wanted a big family. I know I disappointed you. But you never blamed me. You call him Lucky because he was the only one who made it. I've always thought that was rather sly of you.

Across the lake I see a boat approaching, Frank Shepherd's boat, and at first I think he might be going to the marina to pick up his daily sheaf of faxes. But then he steers toward shore, and I know he must be coming to see you, that he's run into yet another glitch in your summer project. More than football, more than golf, computers have taken our husbands away from us. You and Frank are working on a software program to predict the daily migratory patterns of walleye and trout in Lake Kipawa. I can't count the number of hours you've spent in front of the computer adding statistics, checking and double-checking your analysis, accessing other ardent anglers through your modem, all so you can further deplete the already badly depleted fish stocks of Lake Kipawa. I sometimes think you understand the common walleye better than you understand Kevin and me. As for Frank, he's so oblivious, despite his technical expertise, I can see why Lois has long since lost interest in him.

Frank eases up to the dock and cuts his engine. His new half-frames make him look older than he really is, and even though Lois has warned him again and again to wear a hat, he often forgets. Consequently, his bald scalp is burnt and peeling.

"Morning, Pamela," he says in that gruff, friendly way he uses with the wives of his friends. "Is Roy not here?"

He gets out of his boat in his cumbersome way and clips the painter to the nearest ring.

"I'm not sure," I say. I smile as best I can, but I often pity Frank. "He might be up in his workshop. Or he might have gone for a walk to the south point." I glance at my watch. "You're over here early," I say. "You've never been here much before noon."

He clips the back painter to the dock and rises slowly, resting a hand on his lower lumbar; he suffers from chronic back pain. He's not the best of physical specimens. But that doesn't bother you. It's only important that your wife be a perfect physical specimen.

"Are you all right?" he asks. "Everything's all right about last night, isn't it? I've never seen the two of you fight like that. You looked just about ready to kill him."

I feel my face flushing. "I'm sorry I embarrassed you, Frank. I don't usually lose my temper like that. I'm really terribly sorry."

"Don't blame yourself too much, Pamela," he says. "It's not your fault the tuna was off. Roy had no right to blame you. And he should have kept his remarks to himself, especially the one about botulism." He glances up at your workshop perched high above the Lonesome Motel on its own separate rock, surrounded by cedars. Thirty-nine steps to the top. You always liked that because it reminded you of the movie. "Maybe I should go up and talk to him."

"If he's there," I say. "I'm not sure where he's gone."

Frank shrugs. "I guess I'll go up and check." He looks at the steps with some trepidation. "Though my heart's not going to like all those steps."

"Fine," I say. "I'll check the south point."

We go our respective ways. But halfway to the south point I change my mind. You might have come in the back door while I was down at the dock. You might be sitting at the breakfast table right now, fuming over my lack of punctuality.

I climb the front steps, Oscar following along behind, and hurry to the kitchen. Your chair is empty. I look at the kitchen clock. You are now twenty-one minutes late. I don't know why this gives me such a great deal of satisfaction. Your French toast sits untouched and getting cold on your plate. Then again, maybe you've already been to the kitchen. Maybe you've gone to your den.

I walk out to the living room and down the hall to your den.

You are not there. Everything in your den is scrupulously neat, and if I were to run my fingers over any of the surfaces I wouldn't find so much as a speck of dust. That's why I'm surprised when I see one of your hunting rifles, your Remington M760 Game-master, leaning against the chair in the corner, with a box of shells scattered on the side table. Of course I know all about hunting. You always made me come with you. And I endeavored to become the best shot I could, because I always wanted to please you. You are a most responsible sportsman. You always emphasize safety. I can't understand why you left this rifle leaning against the chair when it should be locked away in the cabinet. Are you finally becoming human? Are you finally making mistakes?

I put the gun away and tidy up the bullets. You aren't in the cot-

tage so maybe you are out on the south point. But before I go to the south point I think I had better check the woodshed. Once when I went to the woodshed I discovered a sparrow bat hanging upside down on the low ceiling. I didn't disturb it. It looked so peaceful wrapped in its own wings. I asked you to come out and see it. You caught it in your landing net and crushed it underfoot. I didn't speak to you for the rest of the day. It's the only courageous thing I've ever done.

"It doesn't belong in there," was how you explained your brutal action.

The woodshed is empty. We haven't had a cozy fire in a long time. All the firewood is covered with cobwebs and starting to rot. You don't go to the woodshed much anymore. But I found you here last week. With Lois Shepherd. In a most disreputable state of undress. After everything I've done to make myself the wife you've always wanted, I could hardly believe it. I knew then that I had disappointed you, knew, in fact, that our entire marriage, despite all my unwavering effort, had been a disappointment.

I don't linger in the woodshed. The woodshed reminds me of the fight we had last night. We fought about the tuna. Of all the silly things. We fought about the tuna, yet we have so many other things to fight about: the small irritations that have built up over the years, the petty injustices, the tiny cruelties, and most of all, your habit of neglect.

On the south point I stand among the wild blueberries and stare out at the lake. Was it really such a bad fight we had? I hate to embarrass you. But I was scared. When I saw you in the woodshed last week with Lois Shepherd, I thought no one was going to look after me anymore. The water is smooth and clear, and beneath its surface I see a school of minnows pecking at a submerged boulder. I turn around and look up the hill to your workshop.

I'm at first perplexed by what I see. Frank Shepherd plummets down the thirty-nine steps, taking two, sometimes three at a time. His half-frames dangle around his neck, bouncing against his ample chest, glinting in the sunshine. His face is red and he looks frightened.

He enters the cottage through the back door. What's wrong? Has something happened? I hurry along the path back to the cottage and glance through the kitchen window. Frank is on the phone speaking frantically. I try the back door, but strangely, it's

locked. I look up the thirty-nine steps to the workshop. What did he see up there? I am calm and detached—my Xanax is working full force now. What is making Frank Shepherd behave in this bizarre way?

I climb the steps.

I hardly ever come up here because I know it's your private spot, the place where you sit for hours at a time at your workbench tying flies, or lounging in your chair reading your computer magazines. And as I near the top, I hear the buzzing of flies, hundreds of them, making the air thick with their noise, like a squadron of tiny bombers.

I stop when I'm still several paces away and look at the workshop's open doorway. I don't want to go any farther. Because I now know what happened last night. I see two spent shells from your Remington M760 Gamemaster lying on the doorstep. You never use your Remington. You prefer your Winchester. I never meant to hurt you. And I can't apologize enough for the tuna last night. In the brambles to the side of the path I see my slippers, the silk ones with the purple dragons you bought for me two years ago when we went to China. They are speckled with blood. I don't know how I'm going to get them clean.

I watched you build this workshop. You built it all by yourself. I don't know why you didn't want my help. First I watched you build the thirty-nine steps, then I watched you carry each plank and each timber up those steps on your back. You built it high on that rock so everybody could see. Am I really such a bad wife? Did you need that workshop as a place to get away from me, as a way of proclaiming to everybody on the lake that your wife could be tolerated only so far, that whatever togetherness we had once shared was now brittle and withered; and no longer worth the effort?

I take a few steps closer. I see you lying there. I should have cleaned up the sawdust. Yesterday you were making a new brace for your depth finder. I don't like to see you covered with so much sawdust. I know how much it makes you sneeze. But I was so busy making dinner for the Shepherds—everything I make is always so complicated—that I didn't get a chance to get up here with the broom and the dustpan.

I back away. My stomach cramps. My doctor says it's a side effect from the Xanax, but I don't think so. I've been having these

stomach cramps ever since the Shepherds moved in across the lake last August.

Out on Lake Kipawa I hear a large and powerful engine and, looking out over the bluff, I see the motorboat of the local sheriff's office, with Sheriff Druckman at the helm. Sometimes I feel invisible. You come down from your workshop for lunch at precisely twelve noon, eat your sandwich and soup, never speak to me, never even look at me. You believe that because I'm your wife I don't need to be acknowledged. And I must admit, I'm partly to blame. I've tried to make myself invisible. I know you like me better that way. I know I don't embarrass you as much when I'm invisible.

Frank Shepherd comes out the back door of the cottage and looks up at me, his eyes apprehensive. I'm not going to put up a fight. Everybody knows I'm the most cooperative woman in the world. No one will ever understand that I never meant to hurt you. It's just that I didn't want to embarrass you anymore. I didn't want to disappoint you anymore.

Sheriff Druckman ties his boat to the dock and hurries to the cottage. I turn and take one last look at your workshop. I'm sorry, but I won't be able to have supper ready at your usual six o'clock today. I'm sure Sheriff Druckman will have lots of questions for me. And I think I'll finally have some answers. I'm ready. I'm not even going to pack. I'm going to leave my lipstick and face cream behind. They're going to look after me now. The workshop door swings quietly on its hinges in the breeze coming off the lake—you always keep them so well oiled. Sheriff Druckman and Frank Shepherd begin climbing the thirty-nine steps together. They're going to look after me now.

And that's all I've ever wanted. ●

CUSTOMER SERVICE OR SUBSCRIBER ASSISTANCE

**Please direct all changes of address and
subscription questions to:**



ELLERY QUEEN

P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127



**For change of address, please advise 6 to 8 weeks before moving.
Send your current mailing label with new address.**

ARTHUR'S STORY

by Stephanie Kay Bendel

It isn't easy being a teddy bear. The costume is heavy and hot and makes me itch where I can't scratch, but I've never wanted to be anything else. There's something vitally important about being a teddy bear—an urgency I feel but can't explain.

People call me Stanley—or Kenneth or Jason, depending on which former adoptive family they talk to. I got shuffled around quite a bit during my childhood. People said it wasn't easy to love a kid who thought he was a teddy bear. But I really am one. My name is Arthur.

I work at the Toyland Amusement Park, an enormous complex designed for children under eight. We have nearly fifty gentle rides, three merry-go-rounds, paddle boats shaped like yellow ducks, miniature bumper cars that don't really bump, a helicopter ride that goes ten feet into the air, a tiny train that circles the whole park, safari rides through the zoo, a petting farm, and a picnic area beside the lake; in short, Toyland is a children's paradise. Everything is spanking clean, efficient, and painted in cheerful colors.

Of course, I'm not the only stuffed toy that walks around the park greeting families and posing for their snapshots. We have dogs and cats, tigers and lions, birds and elephants and a large assortment of nursery characters, all carrying a bunch of helium-filled balloons and a pocket full of lollipops. They, of course, are

Stephanie K. Bendel currently resides in Boulder, Colorado with her husband, two children, and two dogs. She has taught writing for more than twenty years, during which time she authored a suspense novel, a textbook on mystery writing, and numerous short stories for magazines such as *EQMM* and *AHMM*. We have another of Ms. Bendel's stories planned for later this year. †

not real—they're merely people in costumes. I'm the only one who's real. I don't need a costume, but I wear it to keep my boss happy.

It was a day like this—a sad, heavy day.

Something's in the air. The littlest children are always the first to sense it. The babies get restless, whiny. The older ones are wired, as if their bodies suddenly have more energy than they can handle and it must be expended quickly or they'll explode. Like that chubby three-year-old boy in the red T-shirt who's supposed to be standing with his mother waiting for a ride through King Cole's castle. He climbs on the railing that zigzags back and forth to contain the line of people in the smallest possible area. The line moves ahead and his mother doesn't notice he's not coming along behind her. The crowd presses forward, separating the two of them. A minute later, she looks around and, not seeing him, calls, "Peter?" in a taut voice. Peter isn't listening. Hanging on the rail by his hands and ankles, he's spotted a caterpillar on the underside of the bar, and is intently studying it. "Peter?" This time, panic laces the name. He's only a few feet away, but she, blocked by the crowd, can't see him.

There is no pain greater than separation of mother and small child, except . . .

I stride forward. "Hey, Mom," I say in my best bear voice. "Need some help?"

The line is moving forward again, and the mother, bewildered, steps out of it. "My little boy," she begins uncertainly.

"Peter?" I boom. "He's right here." With my paw, I indicate the child, behind a dozen people, now lying on his back beneath the rail, still following the travels of the caterpillar.

The young mother's face flushes pink. "Oh, thank you!" She rushes to pick up the child.

"No problem, Mom," I boom heartily as I offer the boy a lollipop. "But I think you and Peter've lost your place in line. Let's see if we can't take care of that." I wiggle my furry bulk and bunch of balloons into the crowd and put my paw on the shoulder of a large balding man. "Excuse me, sir. Peter and his mother were in front of you, I think. They had a little emergency. Would you let them back in?"

Before he has a chance to reply, I nuzzle his overlarge forehead with my mouth and make loud kissing noises, much to the delight of the children nearby. "Isn't this a nice man?" I ask them. They

squeal in delight, the man chuckles self-consciously, and that problem is solved. I lumber away, conscious of Peter watching me, his finger in his mouth.

Such is the work of a teddy bear. My sad feeling lifts a little.

Hold on to this teddy bear. He'll help you feel safe.

When I first came to work at Toyland, ten years ago, right after I turned eighteen, I had some problems. The supervising manager puffed on his pipe and looked at me for a long time. He was a tall thin man with silver hair and silver-rimmed glasses. At last he said, "Well, you're shaped right, anyhow. What we want you to do is to walk around the park, pose for pictures, pat kids on the head, and hand out balloons and lollipops." He puffed again on his pipe. "Above all," he said, "don't talk."

"But I have to talk," I protested. "How can I help them if I can't talk?"

He put the pipe down and looked at me. "Stanley, I told Social Services I'd hire you if you behaved yourself. The owners don't want a teddy bear talking with the kids. That's the job. Take it or leave it."

I took it, and I didn't talk when he was around.

We quarreled again when I insisted on putting the big red ribbon around my neck. "That's not part of your costume," he growled.

"It is now," I said stubbornly. "A big brown bear *needs* a red ribbon."

"You know what, Stanley? You're nuts!"

"My name is Arthur," I said softly. "Arthur Bear."

"Whatever you do, don't call him Arthur. It's critical that he establish his own identity."

Why can't they understand? I am Arthur!

The park is lovely. Flower beds, carefully tended, curving walks with old-fashioned benches beside them. Beyond these trees is the lagoon where the paddle boats weave between the ducks, geese, and swans that live here in the park. I sometimes wonder why I feel such sadness in so beautiful a place.

It was there, above the black water; I stood wet and shivering on the red bridge with the Grandpa-man.

My first adoptive parents took me to a psychiatrist. "He thinks he's a teddy bear," they told the tall pale doctor. "We've named him Kenneth, but he won't answer to that."

The doctor looked at me. "Don't you like the name Kenneth?"

I shrugged. "It's okay. But it's not my name."

My adoptive mother sputtered. "It is his name. We changed it legally—"

The doctor waved her off. "You're almost four years old. I guess you're used to your old name, huh?"

I stared at him.

"What do you like to be called?" the doctor asked.

"Arthur."

"Arthur's a nice name."

My adoptive mother could stand it no longer. "But it's not his old name! The papers show he was christened Stanley! I don't know where the name Arthur comes from!"

The doctor looked at me for a long moment. "So! And you like to pretend you're a teddy bear, eh?"

"It's not pretend."

"Oh?"

"I really am."

A long silence filled the room. Finally he said to my parents, "This may take quite awhile."

After a year and a half, my adoptive parents gave up. They couldn't live with a teddy bear, they said. They wanted a real live boy. I was unadopted and went back to the state home where they called me Stanley again.

"His name is Arthur," the Grandpa-man said. I was surprised.

Near the red bridge, three small children—two boys and a girl—are playing, or rather, fighting.

"Is not!"

"Is so!"

The oldest—the girl, who is about six—pushes one of the boys. He falls on his bottom and cries. The other boy, all of two years old, whacks the girl on the head with a stuffed dinosaur.

"Kids!" This from the young mother who is sitting on a nearby bench, her hands to the sides of her head. "If you don't stop it right now, I'm going to—I'm going to—" Tears come to her eyes.

But murder and suicide are not the answer.

"Ho!" I stride forward. "What's this? Are you children giving your mom a hard time?" I tower over the children and they fall silent. Even the little boy who was crying is struck mute, his mouth hanging open, tears still dripping down his cheeks.

"I guess you didn't know this is 'Be Kind to Your Mom' Day. Moms have limits, you know." The three children are staring at

me. "Come here," I growl. "Now give your mom a big old hug and tell her you're going to be real good the rest of the day."

Uncertain, and keeping their distance from me as much as possible, the three approach their mother and whisper apologies. Even the littlest says, "I sorry."

I pass out balloons and lollipops and the tension is dissipated. "Thanks," the young mother says to me as I turn to go. "I think you saved me from a nervous breakdown."

I smile, though she can't see my face inside the costume. "No problem."

"She had a breakdown recently," someone said. "Couldn't deal with her husband's death."

"Poor thing," said the Grandpa-man.

I don't remember my mother, though I know I had one—even teddy bears have mothers. My adoptive parents—both sets—said they didn't know anything about her, and the people from Social Services only tell me that she was sick and died when I was very small. I know there's more to it than that, though I can't explain how I know. Something else happened, and that something else is why I'm a teddy bear.

The little steamboat on the lagoon whistles sharply three times and in the distance the bells in the clock tower in Little Bo-peep's village begin to ring. It's almost one o'clock—time for the afternoon parade. I have to get to the village square. Today I ride on the first float with Little Miss Muffet and toss candy to the crowd.

As I lumber down the street, weaving through the parents and children who are trying to find vantage points from which to watch the parade, I see a dark wiry man grab a young boy by the back of his collar.

"Come back here! How many times do I have to tell you to stay right beside me. I don't want to keep having to look for you!"

He whips the boy around, takes him by the shoulders, and begins to shake him. The child is fighting tears. "I'm going to teach you—" the man snarls just before I put my paw on the back of his neck.

"I wouldn't do that if I were you," I whisper into his ear. He turns to look at me, shock in his wild eyes.

"Listen carefully," I mutter through clenched teeth, "I know who you are, and I know where you live." This is not true, but he

doesn't know that. "And if you ever harm this kid, I'm going to get you."

The man is sweating as he stares at me, trying to see my eyes behind the costume face. I turn to the child and say, "Would you like a balloon and a lollipop, little boy?" Just before I move on, I glance back at the man. "Have a nice day!" I feel quite important.

"I have something for you, little boy," said the Grandpa-man, reaching into his bag.

"You're late, Stanley!" the supervisor growls as I struggle to climb up on the first float. "How many times do I have to tell you, if you want to keep this job, you have to stay on schedule!"

I shrug my furry shoulders, knowing that if I say anything he'll only get angrier.

"Did you take your pills this morning?"

I nod vigorously.

Little Miss Muffet pretends not to see what's going on. She's a shy girl, not given to confrontation. She hands me a plastic bucket full of wrapped candies and I begin tossing them to the children as the band strikes up a march and the float pulls away.

I don't like taking the pills. They say they're to help me stay in better touch with reality. I'm not sure what that means. I see reality all around me. And if that isn't reality, what is it? Anyhow, the pills don't seem to make a difference in how I see things—they only make me tired.

I miss Stanley. After all these years, I still miss him. Sometimes I think I see him when I look in the mirror, but then I turn around and he's not there.

"How can we explain it to him?"

"He's too young to understand. Better say nothing. He won't remember."

When the parade ends, Miss Muffet turns to me and mutters, "Thank God, we can have a break now. This wig itches!"

She walks off in the direction of the 'employees' lounge, but I don't follow her. Teddy bears don't need breaks, and I have work to do.

It was a day like this. The sun was shining, but the heavy feeling was there. She took my hand and Stanley's and said, "Hurry." We went to the red bridge. There were tears in her eyes.

The dizziness is coming over me. It happens every once in a while. I used to think it was from taking the pills, but one of the

doctors pointed out that I experienced the dizziness long before I began taking pills. When it comes, there is little I can do but sit down on a nearby bench and wait for it to pass. Usually I get very hot—and my costume makes that worse. Sweat pours down my head and back and chest and I begin to tremble. The first several times it happened, I was scared. I thought I was going to die. But it's happened so many times since, I'm no longer frightened—if I feel anything, it's annoyance. I can't work until the dizziness passes, and my work is very important—who knows what will happen if I don't do my job?

"Which one is this?"

"There's a name on his shirt. It says 'Stanley.'"

"Ow-too."

"What did he say?"

"I think he's trying to tell us something hurts. Don't worry, Stanley. You're safe now. We're going to take good care of you. The doctor will check you over to make sure everything's all right."

"Ow-too."

I don't remember much about my first stay at the orphanage. I know I missed Stanley a lot—and her, too, though after a while I couldn't remember what her face looked like.

My second set of adoptive parents—the ones who named me Jason—were older. They, too, took me to a psychiatrist. He didn't have any hair and wore gold-rimmed glasses. His voice reminded me of a yipping Scotch terrier.

"Discovered a bit about his background. You'll have to be very firm."

They made a chart and put it on the kitchen wall. Every time I answered to the name Jason I got a red star. If a day went by and I didn't say anything about being a teddy bear, I got a blue star. If a whole week went by and I got a star every day—it didn't matter which color—I was to get a bonus gold star on Saturday.

I never got any gold stars.

"Was able to fish this one out," the Grandpa-man said. "I couldn't reach the others." His voice cracked. "You see, I can't swim." The park guard nodded. "You did all you could."

"But the other two?"

The guard shook his head.

The dizziness has passed, so I get up and lumber along the walk, although the heavy feeling is still with me. Coming toward me is a plump young woman pushing a double stroller containing

two little girls. The toddlers' heads are covered with golden ringlets and pink ribbons and they lift identical rosy faces to me as I approach.

"Twins!" I exclaim. "Twins are super-special!"

The young mother's face lights up. "Yes, they are."

I bend down to the youngsters. I make sure I don't move too quickly, so I don't frighten them. You could damage a child for a lifetime if you made her frightened of teddy bears. "Would you girls like some balloons and lollipops?" I ask in a gentle voice.

Shyly, the girls nod, their golden curls bobbing.

I hold out a handful of lollipops. "Pick the color you'd like."

Decisions like this sometimes take quite awhile, but I am patient. "Now for the balloons. You get to pick the color of them, too."

"Identical. Even the mother sometimes couldn't tell them apart. Is it any wonder that some experts think twins this young don't distinguish themselves as separate identities?"

A cloud passes in front of the sun. It's the only cloud in the sky, and it has to pass in front of the sun. That reminds me of something, but I don't know what. The bells in the clock tower in Little Bo-peep's village are ringing again. Three o'clock. I have to hurry to Nurseryland Square. In fifteen minutes, the show begins.

Puffing, I reach the stage in front of the bandshell and climb the stairs to join the other Mother Goose characters and stuffed animals. Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary glowers at me.

"I knew I should have taken the waitress job at the pizza parlor! God, what I wouldn't give for a cool shower!"

I pat her on the back with one paw. "Hang in there. Only a couple more hours to go."

"I don't know how you do it, Stanley. I only work five days a week, and it's all I can take. How can you work seven? Don't you ever want a day off?"

I shake my furry head. "I find my work very rewarding." Besides, how could I take a day off from being what I am?

The band starts up and I grab Jack Horner's hand and we begin to prance around. All of us take turns coming to center stage and performing. Cinderella and Prince Charming sing a duet. Raggedy Ann and Andy do a little jig. Jack and Jill do a tumbling routine. I perform last.

When I first started working here, the supervisor told me to sing "The Teddy Bears' Picnic." That was hard. My singing voice

isn't very good and I was embarrassed and sometimes forgot the words. Finally one day I stepped up and, instead of singing, I recited a speech that I'd prepared.

"Never forget that a teddy bear loves you. All you have to do is hug me and I'll make everything better. No more tears. No more bad dreams."

Then I stepped down from the stage and walked into the crowd so the little children could give me hugs. The supervisor was angry because I'd departed from the script, but so many parents told him that their children were thrilled to hug the big teddy bear that he grudgingly admitted my idea was better than singing another song.

Now every afternoon I give my little speech and walk into the crowd for hugs. It's my favorite part of the day.

The Grandpa-man reached into his bag and pulled out a brown teddy bear with a red ribbon around its neck. "I bought this for my grandson, but I think you need him more. His name is Arthur." I was surprised. The bear was named Arthur, too! The Grandpa-man handed me the bear, then took off his jacket and wrapped it around me because I was still shivering. "It's going to be all right, little one," he said. I hugged the bear as tightly as I could.

At six-thirty I leave my costume in one of the employee lockers and take a bus back to the halfway house. I walk into the kitchen where Delia, our housemother, has my porridge waiting. "Here you go, Arthur," she says. "I kept it nice and warm for you."

She's the only one who calls me Arthur—she says some rules are just stupid. She has white hair and wide blue eyes that have crinkles at the corners, and she makes porridge for me every day, no matter what the others eat. I like her.

After supper, I go to my room. It's been a long day full of important work, and I'm very tired. I pull on my pajamas, brush my teeth, and take the other Arthur down from the shelf. His brown coat is worn and no longer plush and his red ribbon is bedraggled. I hug him tightly as we snuggle down together beneath the coverlet. ●



SPEAK NO EVIL

by Nancy Pickard

W

e called him the Devil because he killed women at spiritual retreats: convents, mother houses, religious communes. Each victim was slain with an article of her faith: a rosary, in one case; a cross upon a deadly chain; a veil.

I was pulled into the case from an unusual angle when I got a call from an FBI field supervisor in Kansas City.

"Joseph Owen?" he inquired.

When I agreed that was me, he said, "We've got one, Joe."

"When was she killed?" I asked, holding my breath for the answer.

When he said, "Yesterday," I felt both relief and dread, because that was half of the answer I'd been waiting for since June.

"The victim was Lila Susan Pointe," he reported. "P-o-i-n-t-e. Twenty-seven years old. Caucasian. He strangled her with a white silk altar cloth from a chapel on the grounds of a religious retreat

called Shekinah: S-h-e-k-i-n-a-h. I don't know what they're all about; it may be a cult. This murder fits the Devil's profile, Joe, except that we've got something nobody else has ever had: an eyewitness."

When I heard that, I pounded my fist on my desk, feeling exultant, like a kid saying, yes! It was the other half of the news I'd been waiting to hear.

"Our witness," he said, "is a woman he attacked but didn't kill because other people almost walked up on him. That's the good news, from

which you may infer bad. In addition to taking vows of poverty, obedience, and chastity, our witness added a vow of her own. Care to guess which one?"

When I didn't, he said, "Okay, I'll tell you: Our eyewitness took a five-year vow of silence . . . two years ago." His voice combined frustration with irony. "She won't say a goddamn word to any of us. I hear you're good at getting serial killers to chat, Joe. Would you come out and see if you can get her to talk?"

What he meant was that serial killers were my specialty within the FBI. More than two dozen of them had spilled their repellent guts to me. But I had never yet had the chance to talk to one of their victims, since up to now, they'd all been dead. For the first time, I had a live one.

I flew to Kansas City that morning.

For three years, the Devil had haunted the Midwest, striking seemingly at random, until a former priest within the FBI came to me with a hesitant theory.

"I've noticed," he said, "that the murders always fall on a saint's day associated with the Virgin Mother, or with other saints named Mary."

I would have laughed, because it was absurd, except that I knew

A 1981 *EQMM* Department of First Stories author, Nancy Pickard went on to earn a place on mystery bestseller lists across the country. She is a winner of the Agatha, Macavity and Anthony Awards, and the author of many novels. Her new story for us (along with the Carolyn Hart piece in the 1/97 issue) is also available on the audio cassette *For Crime Out Loud* (Durkin Hayes; editor Robert Randisi). ‡

the world of serial killers was like a cold, strange planet where each inhabitant lived according to his own weird logic. No doubt this one had an abusive mother named Mary, or Maria, or some damn thing. It was often that simple, and that nuts.

"Has the Devil ever killed in the month of June?" he asked me, and I told him no. "Has he killed in every other month?" he asked me, and I said yes.

"June," he said then, "is the only month in which there is no saint's day for a Mary. July is also an exception because there are two celebrations on the same day, the sixteenth."

It was May when he told me his theory.

He and I waited anxiously through June and, sure enough, no murders were reported. Now, one death and a second attack had been reported for July sixteenth, right on schedule. If the ex-priest was right, I had to make our eyewitness break her vow of silence before July twenty-second, which would be the saint's day of Mary Magdalen.

It was six days away.

Before my flight, I said confidently to my wife, "She'll talk. Under these circumstances, only the devil himself would refuse to cooperate."

By that afternoon, July seventeenth, I was rocking over dirt and gravel in a rental car on a Missouri farm road south of Kansas City. The end of the line turned out to be a parking lot cut into the thick woods and situated in front of a long, low building constructed of redwood planks.

I stretched, working fifteen hundred miles of tension and stiffness out of my muscles. As my nostrils opened to let in more air, I smelled wood smoke. I heard the single human sound of wood being sawed and tasted the dust of a dry summer. Because I was an amateur horticulturist—a hobby I began because I wanted to pull something alive out of the earth, for a change, instead of dead and mutilated bodies—I could identify the trees around me: maples, pin oaks, sycamore, locust, and evergreens, rising to mature heights. Creeping vines filled the spaces between them.

I had a sense of people existing like squirrels, or termites—breathing, smelling, eating, sleeping in trees. In fact, I already had been informed that the members of this community called Shekinah did, indeed, inhabit simple lofts built on stilts among the trees. At the moment, those private cabins were invisible to

me; I could see only the headquarters building, which looked like a long, fallen redwood tree. I walked toward it, watching out for poison ivy and snakes, worrying about ticks.

Most signs of the police, sheriff's department, and FBI presence were gone, though very recently they would have been as thick on the ground as leaves. They'd had all the previous day and night and most of this day to gather their evidence, interview people—the ones who would talk—and remove the body. They'd be back, but for now I seemed to be the only investigative authority on the place. That suited me well, because I planned to make friends with this woman, our silent witness. It wouldn't help for her to see me as one more demanding man in an intrusive gang of pushy cops and agents.

Her name, I'd been told, was Sara.

I planned to come on to Sara quietly, respectfully, slowly.

I had it all figured out, down to the crucial moment when I would carefully slip my pen and notepad into my hands. Of course, she would talk to me. How could anyone refuse to talk if saying something would save a life? I marveled at how clumsy the cops who preceded me must have been to prolong her silence. I would put an end to that nonsense. She would talk, for me.

I was taken to a small, plain office occupied by a woman who appeared to be in her seventies. She was white-haired, lean, and tanned brown as a pecan. I thought she looked capable and strong in her commune uniform, which consisted of forest-green trousers and a matching overshirt.

"I'm Joseph Owen," I told her, flashing my FBI identification.

"How do you do, Joseph Owen?" she said, smiling as easily as if nobody had been murdered in her little community. "I am what you might call the director of Shekinah, although my title, my *nom de spirit*, you might say, is Grandmother. They call me the GM when they think I can't hear them." Again she smiled, and her blue eyes twinkled. "If you think you can stand it, I invite you to call me Grandmother, too."

"I'll try," I said, and she laughed at the wry tone in my voice.

I knew her real name; in fact, I knew a fair amount about her and this commune, because I had taken time in Kansas City to copy and study the information a local field agent had put together, and I had all of that, plus copies of the police interviews, in my car. I knew, for instance, that Sara's vow of silence was

total, allowing not even the sign language that is traditional with Trappist monks. She didn't write notes. She didn't nod, she didn't shake her head. In no way did she communicate.

"What's Shekinah?" I asked the GM, because the files were vague on that.

"It's a bona-fide religion," she replied, rather quickly.

"That's not what I meant," I said carefully. "But if you're suggesting the government can't make her talk because that would violate her religious freedom, of course you're right. However, I hope you won't fool yourself into thinking the government won't try to force her if they have to. They can make her silence a miserable and expensive experience for all of you."

"They?" she asked, making the point that I was one of them. "I'm afraid I have no talent for misery, Mr. Owen. And I will remind you that we already live under a vow of poverty."

I felt something like heartburn rise under my breastbone when she said all that, refuting my every point. I recognized the discomfort as frustration, not indigestion. Looking at her serene and contented face, I suddenly had the feeling it was going to become a familiar sensation in this case.

The GM walked me down a forest path that appeared unoccupied by humans until we looked up. Then we could see the lofts among the trees where members of the community lived alone. There was no indoor plumbing in the lofts, no electricity. Not because of their religious beliefs, she told me, but because it was cheaper that way.

"You want to know what we believe, Mr. Owen? We believe in the Ten Commandments, and that's all."

"Which of them forbids her to speak?" I asked.

The Grandmother stopped suddenly on the path and looked back at me. "That was very astute of you," she said, and I felt like a schoolboy who had guessed right on a test and pleased the teacher. "It is the ninth commandment from which Sara draws her will to silence."

I had to search my Sunday school memory to come up with it.

"Thou shalt not bear false witness, right? But nobody's asking her to lie."

"I'm afraid you do not fully understand the commandments, Mr. Owen, at least not as we do. We believe that personality is an illusion, a spider web of lies spun over the truth. We believe the true essence of every person is already perfect, forgiven, and saved. In

regard to the ninth commandment, we believe that to say otherwise of any human being is to bear false witness against him."

"Or her," I suggested.

She smiled. "Those distinctions, too, are illusions."

"No original sin?" I asked.

"Only trite and unoriginal ones," she said, gently.

We had arrived at a wooden ladder where a rope hung down.

"Pull this," she instructed me, "and it will ring the bell in her cabin. Come see me afterwards if you wish."

I stopped her before she could walk away.

"You haven't said a word about the victim, Grandmother."

She stared off into the trees before she looked up at me again.

"Neither have you, Mr. Owen. The difference between us is that in my belief system, Lila Susan is no more dead than you and I are. It's you and the FBI who say she's dead, and who insist on finding her supposed killer. If you believe—really believe—in immortal life, as we do, you understand that no one can ever really die, and so nobody can possibly kill you."

As she walked calmly away and I pulled on the damn rope, I felt the heartburn rise again.

A trapdoor opened in the floor of the loft above me. I climbed the ladder, ten rungs hand over hand, and entered a Lilliputian chamber. There was a cot with a young woman seated on it, her back propped against the wood wall, her face turned down. There were books stacked against the walls, a basket of what looked like clean underwear under the cot, another basket with eating utensils, a small desk with a straight chair, a neat stack of towels, and a folded green uniform like the one she was wearing. Apart from four tall, ugly green plants in plastic pots, that was all there was in the square little room. Four windows provided cross ventilation; at one of them, the metal tubes of a wind chime clinked in the breeze. I left the trapdoor open and sat beside it, cross-legged in my suit, on her wooden floor.

I felt hot, sweaty, itchy, but she looked cool.

"Sara? My name is Joe—Joseph Owen—and I'm an FBI agent. You must be sick of us by now, and I apologize very much for intruding on your privacy." I paused, carefully feeling my way into her silence. She had glanced up at me long enough for me to see a young, plain face with no makeup. All of the Devil's victims were young, in their twenties or late teens, many of them had brown

hair, like hers, and several of them wore their hair pulled back from their face in a long ponytail, as this woman did. After a moment, I started in again. "I'm really sorry about what happened to your friend yesterday, and for what he put you through. We're all glad you survived!"

I let that thought lie between us for a moment while the wind chime played in the window. I was intimate with silence because my own mother had been a profoundly silent woman, except when she exploded in rage at something I—her only child—had done to prick the bubble of her silence. I knew how to wait it out, to coax and manipulate it. Because of my childhood, I hated silence, which was perhaps why I was so adept at getting stubborn people to talk to me.

"Sara, I don't want to frighten you, but the fact is, I'm here to protect you." Her body made an involuntary movement, and I had a feeling I had startled her, which was what I hoped to do in a sly way. I wanted to pull her off of her calm, silent pedestal, and to prod an exclamation out of her, even if it was only an Oh! or a No! If I could break the dam, force one word out of her compressed mouth, her vow would be irreversibly broken, and then she might as well tell me everything. I wanted to go slow, to win her trust, so she'd do what I wished her to do, but there wasn't much time. I said, "If he thinks you can identify him, you're a threat to him, Sara. So I'm going to stick around to protect you."

That was her chance to indicate in some way that she hadn't seen his face, or that she couldn't really identify him, but she didn't do that. She just sat, not moving or speaking. I resisted an urge to shake her until her teeth rattled and words came tumbling out of her mouth. I wanted to tell her she was a spoiled brat, enjoying the luxury of a silence she could end at any time, but that her friend was not so fortunate. Lila Susan Pointe and the other victims were silent, too, but they would never open their mouths and speak to me.

"I'll be around, Sara," I promised her.

I descended from her loft, pulling the trapdoor shut behind me.

The truth was that she probably wasn't in any danger, because he had never killed between saint's days, and never in the same place on another day. The Devil was probably traveling toward his next victim, or even now stalking and studying her. But Sara didn't know that, and now I had an excuse for snaking my way into her life and her trust.



The GM offered me a sleeping bag and a commune uniform when I told her I was Sara's temporary bodyguard. The uniform was even more than I had hoped for; wearing that, I'd soon look as familiar to Sara as any member of her community.

In the GM's office, I said, "What are those ugly plants she grows?"

"They're milkweed, Joseph Owen. I imagine she grows them because they attract monarch butterflies."

Rather stupidly, I asked, "Why does she want to do that?"

The GM smiled. "Who wouldn't? Watch them sometime, Mr. Owen. You'll have the feeling of being in conversation with them. They don't appear to be afraid of us, they hang around as if they want to talk to us, as if they have something really important to tell us."

I tried to keep the cynicism out of my voice. "So she won't talk to people, but she talks to butterflies?"

The GM gently shrugged. "I don't know." She looked meaningfully into my eyes. "Milkweed itself is sensitive to disturbance. You can't jostle them or they'll die, or grow crooked."

"So what are you telling me?" I asked her. "That I shouldn't disturb Sara?"

Instead of answering me, she said, "Are you a reading man?"

"Do you count Clancy?" I asked her. "Koontz, King?"

"Of course." She smiled. "I think people who are readers are more likely to see symbolism where other people just see life."

"So you're saying I'm reading too much into milkweed and butterflies."

"I mean the truth has depth, but no layers."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

The GM smiled at my annoyance. "It means you'll get nowhere by trying to peel the layers off her psyche."

"Jesus Christ!" The profanity exploded from my mouth into the peaceful atmosphere. The entire law enforcement community was seriously annoyed with these people, and I was especially irritated by the sight of the smug old lady standing so serenely in front of me. "There has been a murder. Of one of your own people. And she won't talk, and you talk in goddamn riddles instead of really cooperating. You are selfish, infuriating people."

I was a lot more startled by my outburst than she appeared to be.

"I apologize," I said, and tried to put a rueful, charming smile on my face. "Obviously I am a rude and frustrated man."

She smiled, kindly. "Think nothing of it."

I berated myself all the way back down the path into the woods, where I changed clothes behind a tree and spread out my borrowed sleeping bag to sit on while I waited for Sara to make her first descent from the loft. I was tired, and under time pressure, but that was no excuse. I was going to have to get myself under professional control, or I'd blow it and scare her away.

Day after day I followed Sara like her shadow, and every night I slept under her loft, sometimes staring up at the floor of it in utter frustration.

She wouldn't talk; she wouldn't damn talk.

But I talked, chattering like a friendly magpie, sometimes about serial killers in general, sometimes about the Devil in particular, frequently about the heartrending stories of his victims and their families.

And nothing moved her to speak.

On our way to the latrines, with me shuffling behind her in the leaves, I said, "He has already killed a lot of women, Sara. We know his pattern. The next time he will strike is only five days from now."

Her job at the commune was janitorial work, so I grabbed a sponge and scrubbed floors right beside her. While we worked, I said, "I don't know how much you know about serial killers, Sara, but they come in two types: the disorganized kind and the organized kind. Our guy is the latter. He's very organized, very clever, very careful. He scouts out his locations and studies his victims before he makes his attack."

Sitting beside her at the communal dinner table, I whispered, "A place like this, Sara, all he has to do is hide in the woods and watch and wait for his chance."

Going to chapel at sunrise, I said, "We think we know how he gets into some of the places, Sara. He arrives as a repairman, or a deliveryman, which is the only possible way he could worm himself into convents, for instance."

In the evenings, because she didn't object, I climbed her ladder and propped myself on the floor beside a milkweed pot, and I carried on a one-sided conversation with her. "As far as we know, you're the only person who can identify him, Sara. An artist could draw a portrait from your description, but we don't want too much time to go by or you might begin to forget what he looked like. We could broadcast the picture, pass it out to places like this, so they can protect their members. We can find

him, Sara, with your description. You can save lives.”

Once, I said, “It’s you and me and God against the Devil, Sara.”

As Monday passed, then Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, it became more difficult for me to be gentle and patient with her. I thought she was ridiculous, a fool playing an egotistical, dangerous game with other women’s lives.

I asked the GM, “Why silence?”

Her answer was to hand me a cassette tape, which I took out to the parking lot where I could listen to it privately in my rental car.

The voice that emerged from the car’s dashboard was light, girlish, and a little breathless, as if she were nervous, or as if she’d been running and had only stopped long enough to drop a few thoughts into a tape recorder:

“This is Sara,” the voice on the tape announced self-consciously. It felt strange to finally hear the voice that went with the silent face I’d been studying so closely. The words tumbled out so fast I had to reverse the tape several times to understand them.

“This is Sara. I’ve said enough in my life. Way too much. Lots of things that hurt people. Things that make me feel awful, just knowing I said them. I’m good at saying all the wrong things. Mean things. Lies. I talk all the time, too. I lie like a rug, I lie like a whole carpet store! I can’t stop it, I don’t know how to stop lying, except to stop speaking altogether. I drive people crazy with my talking and lies. They can’t trust me, they tell me so. Nobody should ever trust anything I ever say! I’m boring, I’m self-centered, I never listen to anybody, and I know that, and the words keep coming, all the same. I’m sick of the sound of my own voice! I’m going to stop talking, because all I ever do when I open my mouth is lie and hurt people. So, I’m going to start listening. I’m not going to say anything, not anything, unless God puts the words in my mouth. Starting now. Right now. This is the last word. Honest.”

The next sound on the tape was her giggling, and then she said once more, and dramatically: “Starting . . . now!”

There was nothing more on the tape.

I sat in the car, thinking the amazing thing was that she’d done it, for two years, so far. Amazing.

In the GM’s office, I handed back the tape and said, “So what did she lie about that hurt people so much?”

“It wasn’t anything big,” the GM told me, “nothing like falsely

accusing a man of rape or murder, for instance. Just a constant stream of little lies, gossipy, vicious little fabrications that hurt people's feelings more than anything. She was disliked as a consequence. Now she's quietly accepted everywhere she goes in the community."

"Like a house plant," I said drily. "What does she get out of it?"

"Relief, I think," the GM replied. "She used to steal things, too. Clothing, mostly, which she would wear in front of all of us and claim it was hers. Blatant, outright lies, looking you straight in the face."

"Does she still steal things?"

"No, that stopped soon after she went silent."

"So it's working, her silence?"

"I don't know," the GM admitted. "There's no way for me to know if she has finally learned to tell the truth to herself."

On Saturday, one day before the saint's day for Mary Magdalen, I confronted the GM in her office. "She's lying to herself," I said, "if she thinks she's doing the right thing this time."

"But Mr. Owen, if she talked to you, how would you know she was telling the truth? Have you thought about that? What kind of witness would she make in court, a self-confessed, nearly pathological liar?"

"I don't care what she does in a courtroom." Suddenly, I was angry again and yelling at the old woman. "I just want her to tell me enough to stop him! Don't you get it? He's going to kill another woman . . . tomorrow . . . and another and another after that, unless Sara identifies him. When we catch him, we'll gather other evidence, so we won't even need her for a conviction, but right now, she's got to talk. If she doesn't talk by tomorrow morning, she'll have a lot more than lies on her conscience."

The GM smiled patiently at me, as a grandmother might at a toddler having a tantrum, and she merely said, "Well, she might even lie about his appearance, you know."

I felt like strangling both of them.

I didn't sleep that night in my bag under the goddamned loft, because I felt haunted by the ghosts of the other women he'd killed, all of them urging me to *do* something before other women joined their dreadful sorority.

Sunday, July twenty-second, passed in silence, with me dogging Sara's footsteps as usual, but for once I remained as silent as she.

That night the telephone brought word of what I feared most: The Devil had struck on schedule, killing a woman at a Buddhist retreat north of San Francisco.

I stalked on stiff legs to Sara's cabin and climbed the ladder, clumsy in my fury and sorrow.

"Well, you've done it," I told her, my voice as cold as the sound of the metal wind chimes. "You've let him kill another one."

I gave her the details, all of them, sparing her nothing.

If she had a reaction, I couldn't see it in the dark cabin where she sat on her cot, her back turned toward me, her face to the wall.

That night, I raged over the phone to the field supervisor.

"I hate these people," I told him. "They don't give a damn about the victims, and I don't give a damn about them."

The supervisor laughed, but it was a cynical sound of understanding, rather than amusement. "So, Joe . . . no more Mr. Nice Guy?"

"Hide and watch," I advised him.

The next day, methodically, I set about turning the other members of the community against her. I took them aside individually and in little groups under the pretext of interviewing them one more time, and I spoke to them of the suffering of the victims, the heartbreak of the families, and of their own potential for becoming a next victim. I played on their compassion, their fear. I allowed them to get a glimpse of my frustration, of my decent motives, of my anxiety, and of how terrible I felt over my failure to get Sara to talk. By the time I finished with them, I had them looking over their shoulders for fear the Devil was hiding in the woods, watching, waiting, looking them over, winnowing them out, selecting his next victim from among all of them.

One by one, they responded as I hoped they would, in frightened or indignant or sympathetic words. They said, "I'll talk to Sara!" or . . . "Sara has to break her silence!" or . . . "It's not right, what she's doing, it's not holy!" One of them even said to me, "Sara is being selfish and wicked, and I'm going to tell her so."

For the first time, then, I left the commune.

For twenty-four hours I stayed away, luxuriating in a motel while I allowed my poison to do its work.

When I returned, the GM met me at the headquarters door.

She said, "What have you done, Joseph Owen?"

Instantly, I felt triumphant.

"Is she talking?" I asked.

"No." But the GM looked worried for the first time since I'd met her. "You'd better see her. She's in her cabin."

I hurried down the path, feeling exultant.

At first, when I stepped inside the cabin, I didn't think she was there.

"Sara?" I called, which was silly, because there was hardly anything left in the cabin except her cot. The milkweed pots were gone. The blankets and sheets had been pulled off the cot and pushed under it. The baskets of underwear and eating utensils were gone. So was the stack of towels, and the books.

Dammit! Had she run away from me?

I felt shocked by rage and disappointment.

But then I saw a movement in the jumble of bedclothes under the cot and I realized Sara was wrapped up in them. She had crawled under her cot and covered herself from toe to head in the sheets and blankets.

I heard a muffled sound, and thought at first it was a bird.

Then I realized she was weeping, unable for once to control the sound of her own voice.

My thought was savage: *Good!*

But now I could afford to be gentle, now I could play the good cop once again. I knelt down near her and said softly, "Sara? When you're ready to talk to me, I'll be right here. I won't ever leave you, Sara, not until you're ready for me. I'll be here for you when the time comes."

I slept in her cabin that night, instead of underneath it.

There came a point, however, when my own nature silently called, and I had to descend the ladder to find a john. I took the opportunity to make a fast trip to retrieve the sleeping bag from the GM's office. Sara was going to talk that night, I knew it, and if she didn't, I was going to lock the trapdoor if I had to and keep her a prisoner in her cabin until she did what I wanted her to do.

The GM walked in as I was leaving her office with the bedroll.

Once again her face was unlined, her smile pacific.

"Aren't you worried anymore?" I asked her. "You seemed worried earlier."

"Prayer is a marvelous antidote to worry, Mr. Owen."

"You could probably force me to go away," I told her.

"This is Sara's opportunity for growth," was her calm reply.

"If I were Sara," I said, and I actually laughed, "I think I'd shoot you."

"That, too," said the Grandmother, smiling, "would offer enormous spiritual opportunities for her."

But this time, I was determined to have the last word.

"Your other members don't seem quite as convinced as you are that they're immortal. I get the feeling they're afraid to die."

I was astonished to see tears appear in the GM's blue eyes.

"Thank you, Joseph," she said, "for giving all of us a chance to face our own worst fears."

Damn the woman, she left me speechless, as usual.

I brushed past her, but she surprised me again by putting a hand on my arm to stop me: "Mr. Owen, tell me again about the pattern of organized serial killers, will you?"

I did it quickly, because I was in a hurry to resume my vigil over Sara, so she wouldn't try to escape while I was gone.

"They are methodical, careful, clever," I recited. "They study their victims, who are often very similar to each other, so as to know the best time and means of approach and attack. Frequently, they win their victim's trust by coming on as friendly and sincere, or in need of help. Often, once they have their victims, they hold them prisoner for some time, toying with them, before actually killing them."

"I see," the GM said, and her blue eyes looked brightly into mine. "Are you a good listener, Mr. Owen?"

"Of course," I said, curtly. "That's my business."

"Good," was all she said before releasing me.

I hurried back down the path thinking, what the hell was that all about?

The next saint's day on which the Devil would strike would not come until September, so there was a little time for us, but probably not for me. There was no way the higher-ups would let me stay out in the boonies trying to pressure just one witness. I figured I had only a little more time left before they called me back to my other work. But I would make the most of every minute of the time I had with Sara, if I had to tie her to her cot and show her photographs of the Devil's victims to make her finally talk to me.

It was a hot July, and the air was thick with humidity.

I heard a sound in front of me and realized it was Sara's trap-door opening.

No! I thought, she's not getting out of there, I'm not letting her leave that cabin until she talks!

I ran forward, through the trees, nearing the stilts on which her home was built just as she kicked the ladder away.

Hell! She couldn't defeat me that way, I'd just prop the ladder up again! I slowed my pace, laughing at her for thinking she could keep me away from her.

And then I saw her feet and her legs drop through the hole.

I expected her to drop on down to the ground.

Instead, her legs dangled through the opening, her body knocked against the edges of the hole.

"Sara!"

With a sudden, horrible realization, I comprehended what she had done. I stumbled toward her, yelling her name. Reaching her legs, I embraced them, and lifted them, so that her full weight couldn't fall downward. Above me, through the hole, I saw that she had tied her sheets together, tied one end over the beam in her cabin, and circled the other end around her neck. Then she had jumped through the hole in the floor.

I shouted desperately for help.

Members of the community came running. Two of them got into her cabin through the windows. They untied her and lowered her gently into our waiting arms. We laid her on the ground in the leaves.

"Sara?" I whispered to the still and silent face.

She had tried to hang herself.

Was she still alive?

Had her neck been broken as she fell through the floor?

After a moment, Sara's eyelids quivered and she moaned, the most beautiful sound I had ever heard.

When I was sure she would live, I ran to find the Grandmother.

After that, I simply walked to my rental car and drove away.

My hands trembled on the steering wheel because the Devil was still out there, and I knew him well. I glanced in the rearview mirror and saw a white-faced man. My foot shook on the accelerator as I thought about my reputation for understanding serial killers. Again, I glanced in the mirror. Oh yes, I knew them as well as I knew myself.

I had studied her and stalked her, imprisoned her, tortured her by my presence and my demands, and I had nearly killed her.

And she was only the latest of my victims.

On my flight home, I mentally reviewed the names of the men who were dead because of my investigations, men who were, in many ways, all alike. They'd been killed upon capture, or by the death penalty. They, too, I had stalked and studied, before snatching them and imprisoning them until they were put to death.

I went home to my wife—but then, many organized types of serial killers are married, or have girlfriends. I was no different.

I was no different.

The Devil was apprehended within the year, but I was gone from law enforcement by then, having quit in order to use my law degree in ways that would not tempt me to become what I hated. Somebody had to catch the killers, but it didn't have to be me.

I do a lot of gardening now.

I'm very familiar with milkweed and monarchs.

Three years after I left Shekinah, I received a letter from the Grandmother.

"Dear Joseph Owen," the letter began, in her own unmistakable style. "I thought you would want to know that Sara has recovered beautifully, with no ill effects. She is talking now, rather like a baby with her first words. Her voice sounds rough from lack of use, and she is shy about what she says and to whom she speaks. I do believe she accomplished what she set out to do: to learn to love the truth, and to speak only that, as best she can. The world is, I believe, a sweeter place as a consequence. Frequently I hear her laugh, a welcome and lovely sound to me.

"She told me she desperately wanted to speak to you when you were here, but that she could feel lies building up inside her mouth, and she was terrified that if she spoke she would lead you in such wrong directions you would never catch your killer, and many other women might die. She remained silent to save their lives. Then she tried to kill herself in order to make sure she could not harm you or any woman by speaking the lies that were tempting her.

"Now Sara dreams of the women whom you speak of as being killed, and they talk to her and tell her they are alive in spirit.

"I hope this will comfort you, Joseph Owen."

I threw away the letter, but not in anger.

I've thrown away my scrapbooks, too, the ones I used to keep on the serial killers I helped to stalk, imprison, and kill. Like Sara, I've learned to tell the truth to myself. And so, I no longer allow myself to keep trophies of my victims. ●

NEXT ISSUE...

Solo

BY MARCIA MULLER

Night Crawlers

BY JOHN LUTZ

Political Corrections

BY SIMON BRETT

Shifter

BY SUZANNE JONES

ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE, Vol. 109, No. 3, Whole No. 667, March 1997. Published monthly except for a combined September/October double issue by Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications. 1 year subscription \$33.97 in U.S.A. and possessions, \$41.97 elsewhere, payable in advance and in U.S. funds (GST included in Canada). Call 800-333-3053 with questions about your subscription. Subscription orders and mail regarding subscriptions should be sent to Ellery Queen, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. Editorial and Executive Offices, 1270 Avenue of the Americas, New York, N.Y. 10020. Periodical postage paid at New York, N.Y. and at additional mailing offices. Canadian postage paid at Windsor, Ontario. Canada Post International Publications Mail, Product Sales Agreement No. 260649. © 1997 Dell Magazines, a division of Crosstown Publications, all rights reserved. Protection secured under the Universal Copyright Convention and the Pan American Copyright convention. ELLERY QUEEN'S MYSTERY MAGAZINE® is the registered trademark of Ellery Queen. Submissions must be accompanied by self-addressed stamped envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for unsolicited manuscripts. POSTMASTER: Send Change of Address to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, P.O. Box 5127, Harlan, IA 51593-5127. In Canada return to 3255 Wyandotte Street East, Windsor, Ontario N8Y 1E9. ISSN: 1054-8122. Dell GST: R123054108. For back issues, send your check for \$5.00 (U.S. funds) to Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine, Suite 1500, 251 Main Street, Stamford, CT 06901-2988. Please specify the issue you are ordering. Add \$2 per copy for delivery outside the U.S.

JANET HUTCHINGS
Editor

VARSHA MAHTANI
Editorial Assistant

MONICA GAIGE-ROSENSWEIG
Creative Director

ANTHONY BARI
Junior Designer

CYNTHIA MANSON
VP, Director of Marketing
& Subsidiary Rights

GEORGE SCHUMACHER
Manager, Contracts & Permissions

BRUCE SHERBOW
Director of Newsstand Sales

SANDY MARLOWE
Circulation Services

CAROLE DIXON
Production Manager

FRANCINE MOORE
Advertising Sales Manager

PETER KANTER
Publisher

FRAN DANON
Editorial Director

ELLERY QUEEN
Editor-in-Chief 1941-1982

ELEANOR SULLIVAN
Editor-in-Chief 1982-1991

ADVERTISING OFFICES

NEW YORK 212-698-1313

ADVERTISING REPRESENTATIVE

DRESNER DIRECT, INC., New York, N.Y.
212-889-1078

PRINTED IN U.S.A.



THE BUTLER DID IT?



STAY TUNED...
SUBSCRIBE NOW
AND FIND OUT WHODUNIT!

2 years (24 issues) for only 49.97 (you save more than 25%!)
or 1 year (12 issues) for \$25.97 (you save more than 20%!)*

CALL



NOW

1-800-333-3053

OR



MAIL TO

ELLERY QUEEN

P.O. Box 5127

Harlan, IA 51593

Allow 4 to 6 weeks for delivery of your first issue. Outside USA:
Add \$5 per year for shipping & handling. All orders must be
paid in U.S. funds. Offer expires 6/30/97. *We publish a double
issue in September/October which counts as two issues toward
your subscription.

HA612

LICENSED TO UNZ.ORG
ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

CLASSIFIED MARKETPLACE

EQ March '97

QUEEN/HITCHCOCK combination CLASSIFIED AD rate is \$4.80 per word—payable in advance (\$72.00 minimum). Capitalized words 60¢ per word additional. To be included in the next issue, please send order and remittance to Diane Addison, Media People, 32 Shepard Road, PO Box 446, Norfolk, CT 06058, or call 1-800-542-5585 or fax to 860-542-6904.

ADDITIONAL INCOME

GET PAID FOR READING BOOKS! Up to \$100 each. Send name, address: Calco Publishing (Dept. C-102), 22 North Plains, Wallingford, CT 06492.

APPAREL

"MYSTERY" SLOGANS on T-shirts, hats, sweatshirts, pillows - silkscreened/embroidered. FREE CATALOG! 1-888-ARA-EGO-8, ARA EGO Products.

AUTHORS

PUBLISH YOUR BOOK NOW! Your book can be produced and promoted by the leading subsidy book publisher. Send for free brochure: HP-5, Vantage Press, 516 W. 34th St., New York, NY 10001.

BOOKS & PERIODICALS

FREE catalogs. Collectible and used mystery fiction. Murder is Served, 5273 Bittersweet Drive, Dayton, OH 45429, 937-438-0211

INVENTORS

INVENTORS: Receive your FREE information kit about PATENTING and Marketing. New product ideas. The Concept Network, 1-800-835-2246 ext.197. Call Now!

PERSONAL

Nationwide introductions! Refined singles 18-80. Also Japanese, Asian, European! Identify, Box 315-DT, Royal Oak, MI 48068.

PSYCHICS

LIVE PSYCHICS specializing in love, money, dream interpretation, and difficult decisions! Highly accurate! Confidential! CALL 24 HOURS: 1-900-329-4779. \$3.99/MIN., 18+

**your
classified/display
ad can be placed
HERE**

for details—
DIANE ADDISON
Media People, Inc.
32 Shepard Road
Norfolk, CT 06058
(800) 542-5585
(860) 542-5535
Fax: (860) 542-1943

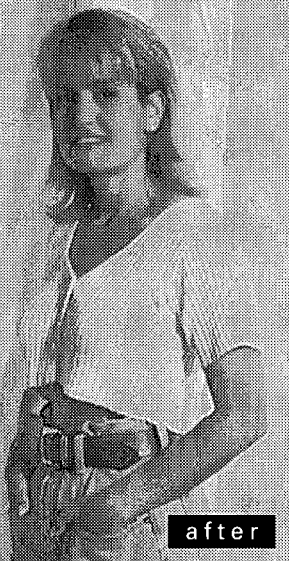
IN THE FUTURE

HEALTH UPDATE



After the baby, nothing came off. Then I used the Six-Day BioDiet three times and lost a total of 38 pounds!

—Gina Muto



Use metabolic enhancers to shed those unwanted pounds—in just six days!

New program uses fruit and vegetable diet meals, metabolic enhancers, vitamin supplements and dieter's tea to cleanse impurities from your body, jump-starting you to a new lifestyle!



The BioDiet cocktails are made from a wide array of vegetables and fruits. BioDiet provides all the nutritional value you need during the program.

European wisdom about periodically cleansing the body by abstaining from solid foods is the foundation for the Aspen Spa Six-Day BioDiet. This program of vegetable and fruit juice meals and metabolic enhancers cleanses impurities and takes off up to 14 pounds in six days!

All-natural. Ingredients are selected for freshness, purity and nutritional

value. BioDiet's unique blend of nature's best ingredients put your body on the fast track to improved health and weight loss.

Scientifically formulated. BioDiet's juice cocktails and dietary supplements are formulated to meet your daily nutritional requirements.

Six days to a new you. Commit yourself to the program and you'll soon feel the effects of detoxification and weight loss!

After you complete the program, extend your commitment to a healthier lifestyle by choosing high-fiber, low-fat foods. If you haven't reached your weight-loss goals, use BioDiet in alternating six-day cycles until you reach your desired weight.

Try it without risk. BioDiet has a money-back manufacturer's guarantee. If you're not satisfied, return it for a "No Questions Asked" refund.

BioDiet **\$79 \$9 S&H**
Ask about additional BioDiet products available!
Please mention promotional code **1571-MG-10158**.

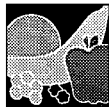
For fastest service, call toll-free 24 hours a day

800-231-3511



comtrad industries

2820 Waterford Lake Dr., Suite 102
Midlothian, Virginia 23113



On days one, three and five, you'll drink the fruit cocktail, which contains juice from blackberries, white grapes, apples, pineapples, oranges and bananas.



On days two, four and six, you'll drink the vegetable cocktail, which contains juice from carrots, celery, tomatoes, watercress, beets, potatoes and radishes.

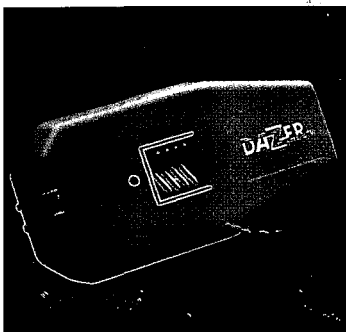
*Not all ingredients listed

ELECTRONIC REPRODUCTION PROHIBITED

Select Styles Emporium

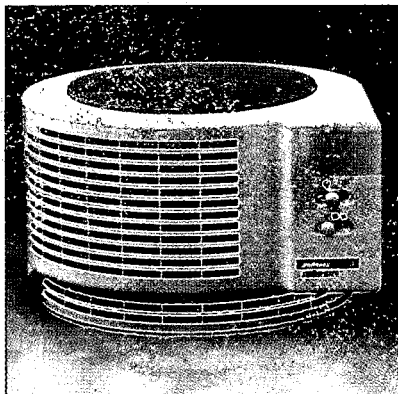
The Ultrasonic Deterrent - The Dazer™

The Dazer is a handheld dog deterrent. Utilizing safe, humane, ultrasound technology the Dazer is a must for joggers, bicyclists, the postman and especially kids and seniors. The Dazer works by producing a discomforting, but not harmful, high frequency sound audible only to dogs. Unlike Mace and other chemical deterrents there is no harm to the animal. It's compact, lightweight and features a belt clip for easy carrying. Shipped with a 9 volt battery. #2DE202



\$34.⁹⁸ (\$5.⁹⁵ S&H)

Tabletop IONIZER Air Freshener - with Three Filters



This revolutionary air cleaner uses four technologies to clean, deodorize and eliminate bacteria from the air. First, a High Density Carbon Prefilter traps odors and captures larger particles. Next the unique BioGerm™ filter eliminates germs, including staph and strep bacteria. Then a Hospital Grade HEPA Main Filter removes 99% of all airborne particles (0.3 microns or larger) while the 5 needle ionizer further reduces pollutants and freshens and revitalizes the

air. Filters the volume of air in a 12' x 16' room 3x per hour. 110 volts UL Listed #2DE909

\$129.⁹⁸ (\$11.⁹⁵ S&H)

Call Toll Free:

1-800-580-9445

NJ Residents Add 6% Sales Tax
Canadian Orders Add \$6.00



**To Order By Mail Send
Check or Money Order To:
Point to Point
PO Box 2007
Brick, NJ 08723**